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THE EARTHEN LOT

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For
AGNES HERBERT

And, strange to tell, among
the Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while
others not:
And suddenly one more im-
patient cried—
"Who *is* the Potter, pray,
and who the Pot?"

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám.

CITY OF DENVER

BOOK ONE

I

STRINGS of signal flags, like a harlequin's washing day, made fluttering parti-coloured splashes between the Auberge D'Aragon and the opposite houses. Beneath the flags hung lines of unlighted Chinese lanterns, bobbing and ducking on the breeze. A wide white bandage, decorated at either end with a Red Cross, stretched across the centre of the building. In the middle of the bandage was written "Grand Red Cross Fête" in letters of a fatness and a redness equalling the fatness and redness of the two crosses. Pillars had bunting twisted round them, windows flaunted Union Jacks, White Ensigns and foreign flags, a strip of baize and a striped awning projected into the square.

Victoria Tresidder shamefacedly stood beside a freckled midshipman sitting cross-legged on the edge of the carpet. There was a row of midshipmen, old ones, childish ones, dark ones, fair ones, and all radiated the compounded odours of soap, brilliantine, tobacco and antiseptic tooth-paste, which she had come to recognize as the universal aroma of the well-bred male. Her sense of smell was acute, unconsciously she classified humanity according to the impression they made upon her nostrils. Small girls and boys had a perceptible odour of milk about to turn; beggars gave off a miasma of perspiration and dust; grown-up ladies smelt of lily-of-the-valley

out of bottles, and all the Maltese were identified with the smell of garlic.

Unused to boys, she was overwhelmed with shyness, and would gladly have exchanged her conspicuous position among the mysterious big-limbed males for blind obscurity at the back of the crowd. As it was she was pinned to her place by the ladies of the garrison, waiting in warm and uncomfortable proximity to see the Governor arrive.

The older and more important flaunted modern gowns showing daring innovations; the girls and young matrons wore fancy costumes, shedding gored skirts and whalebone tight bodices with a resultant undressed appearance that was almost shocking. Mrs. Tresidder, jealous for her position, wore a fashionable dress which had arrived in a bandbox on the previous day from London. The heavily boned bodice of shimmering sequins fitted tightly from neck to waist, from shoulder to wrist, unadorned save for irrelevant bunches of chiffon at the armholes. A long gleaming skirt caressingly defined the rounded lines of thighs and hips, and flowed to the ground in a wild spate of foaming ruffles. This creation was copied from a dress worn by the Princess of Wales at a recent drawing-room at Buckingham Palace, but the wearer had artfully improved upon the model by filling in the neck and introducing certain hooks and eyes whereby the device might be removed like a lid and the gown restored to the original design.

Mrs. Tresidder mitigated the tedium of waiting by congratulating herself on the appearance of her daughter's yellow satin gown, a glimpse of which she could obtain from her position in the crowd. Much better, she thought, than the frock worn by that common little

Maudie Lancaster prinking in the doorway with the bouquet she was presenting to the Governor's wife.

Presently Mrs. Tresidder transferred her complacent musings to the world at large. She noticed a heaving and scuffling in the ranks of the Maltese who filled the square at a respectful distance from the red-and-white awning, indicating, she supposed, that the Governor was trying to get through. Simultaneously the band ceased playing "The C.I.V.'s are Coming," and broke into "God Save the Queen." Her overweening loyalty had a touch of the proprietorial about it; to encourage the Royal understudy she waved her handkerchief with intimate fervour.

Meanwhile Victoria, looking down at her costume, felt none of the satisfaction enjoyed by her mother. The yellow garment reached the floor and terminated with a frill. Tiny puffed sleeves displayed thin mottled arms and knobby elbows, the low-cut bodice showed her bony neck. The frock was intended for plump pink-and-white little girls with haloes of fluffy golden curls. Victoria's hair was yellow and straight, and a Malta summer had bleached the colour from her face; her only beauty was extinguished by round steel spectacles. At nine years old Victoria was painfully conscious of her homely appearance, but never doubted that the calamity was of a temporary nature and would be rectified with the passing of years, as in the case of The Ugly Duckling. For the present there was no denying she was deplorably plain, which plainness was accentuated by Mrs. Tresidder's custom of dressing her in the style which she had popularized in her paintings of juvenile subjects.

Hardly any suburban drawing-room was complete without a reproduction of Mrs. Tresidder's most successful picture "Can 'oo Laugh?" which was "on the line"

in the Academy of 1889. It represented a pretty little girl in a very long dress with a frill at the hem, peering sideways at a massive St. Bernard, which in turn regarded the little girl with a benign expression that was almost human. Behind was a large cedar with a circular seat round it, a stretch of lawn, and in the middle-distance a glimpse of a noble mansion. The original painting was purchased by the Queen and hung at Balmoral. In succeeding years the artist produced innumerable pictures based upon the same theme. Occasionally the landscape was exchanged for an Empire interior with a harpsichord and a tiger-skin rug; sometimes the St. Bernard was not there, but always the little girl in the long frock remained gambolling in the foreground, unchangingly pleasant, wholesomely British.

Marriage interrupted the annual delivery of these innocent works of art. The frequent upheavals peculiar to the household of a Naval officer and the unsuitable environments in which these migrations culminated did their best to obliterate genius, but as circumstances brightened so the artist's ambition reasserted itself. Lieutenant Tresidder's appointment to the command of a destroyer in the Mediterranean fleet meant an established home for his family, and the higher rate of pay, plus "hard-lying money," promised an almost affluent income. With characteristic promptitude Mrs. Tresidder purchased an outfit of brushes, paints and canvases, and after engaging Sheila Doran as a governess for Victoria, followed her husband to Malta.

§

Inside the *auberge* the corridor and large rooms leading one into the other held the antagonistic atmosphere

peculiar to old buildings when forced into an alliance with bazaars, harvest festivals, and fêtes. The hostility of the historic walls to the litter amassed with infinite trouble by the benevolent in the name of charity sounded in the empty echoes and was in the dead smell of dust.

But the bazaar was grand too, and breathlessly exciting. Supporters shed their customary characteristics with joyful abandon and replaced them with gala qualities, so that earnest activities came from those who were usually uninterested, and voluble amiability actuated the habitually morose. An unreal make-believe with enchantment behind it.

In the tea-room Victoria moved from table to table, covering them with white cloths which she arranged with careful precision, patting the creases out with thin, deft hands. Maudie Lancaster followed, carrying a bundle of knives and spoons, which she dropped higgledy-piggledy with jarring metallic notes. Overtaking Victoria, impatiently she shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she watched the methodical procedure.

"Slow-coach!" she said, making a grab at the pile of cloths and letting more spoons fall in a clattering cascade. "I'll show you the way to do it."

"You can't leave it like that; it's all up at this side and draggling on the floor at the corner."

"It doesn't matter, it's on, anyway!" Maudie swooped after the spoons, and dropped them crookedly with sharp tinkles on to the table.

"You've spoilt it; it's all untidy, everything sideways and ugly."

"All right, do it yourself if you're so particular! We've got servants at home to lay tables, dozens of them.

The Pater never allows Mater and me to do anything; he knows we're Royal." Maudie made the announcement with pride, watching to see its effect upon Victoria.

"Are you a relation of the Queen's?"

"No, stupid! We're French, one of the Bourbons married my great-great-grandmother. Of course they were not married like ordinary people. Awfully interestin', isn't it? Mater says that's where I get my vivacity from."

Victoria, six years younger than the mature Maudie and unacquainted with the meaning of vivacity, wisely nodded her head.

Thinking Victoria a stupid, stodgy child, Maudie crossed the room to Sheila Doran, who was arranging green leaves and orange blossoms in vases and lovingly caressing the glossy foliage and waxy flowers with long white fingers. Victoria's governess wasn't exactly pretty, but there was something about her face that arrested attention, a brooding look which guarded a glowing secret.

Suspecting Sheila to be the victim of a hopeless attachment to an impoverished Irish nobleman, romantic Maudie determined to probe the matter to the bottom. She commenced her attack with tinkling small-talk on the merits of Malta as an island, a topic which could be turned on to the comparison of one island with another. Ireland could be introduced in this manner, and she trusted to her ingenuity easily to drift from land to landlords and thence to love. But although Maudie carried out her programme to schedule, she was compelled to supply all conversational openings herself, Sheila returning non-committal answers which left the schemer unenlightened. Presently the governess broke off two sprays of

orange blossoms and fixed them low behind her ears in the waves of her unbound copper-coloured hair.

"Orange blossoms on your head,
You'll be dead before you're wed,"

the frustrated Maudie vindictively improvised.

"And was I after telling you that I wished to be wed?" demanded Sheila.

"Huh, everybody knows what girls come to Malta for, even governesses!" and then over her retreating shoulder she threw her bombshell. "Fishing fleet!"

§

Maudie was not herself fond of work, but she enjoyed watching the activities of others, so she strolled over to the tea-urn which Mrs. Tresidder was trying to boil with dabbing assistance from Mrs. Lancaster, who kept up a running monologue meanwhile.

"Of course it is very gratifying to be all in all to one's husband, far be it from me to suggest otherwise, but it has its other side too. If another man looks at me, even so much as a glance, my husband is up in arms at once. Madly jealous, my dear." She paused, waiting for an encouraging murmur from her listener. Mrs. Tresidder was poking her hat-pin down the spout of the refractory urn and her response was a preoccupied grunt. It took more than an uninterested audience to quench the flow of Mrs. Lancaster's reminiscences.

"It's certainly delightful to be so appreciated, but then the women of my family have always been noted and singled out for their charms and attractions. My poor dear great-grandmother found it so to her cost. She captivated Prince Charles of Bourbon—a handsome

younger son of the wicked King Louis—they were morganatically married, quite under the rose, you know."

Complacently she patted the large indifferent miniature of a bovine elderly man with protruding pale blue eyes, a white curled wig and lace cravat, which hung suspended from her neck on a chain of plaited hair.

"I always maintain it is where Maudie and I get our vivacity from—she is just like me, full of *joie de vivre*. Maudie and I can be relied upon to chat. No matter what our personal feelings may be, we are able to rise above circumstances. Last night, for example: I was fagged out, but I went to the ball on board the *Ramillies*, purely because I knew it was my duty to go, and I danced every dance, positively every one. When it came to the last Washington Post with that wicked Blue Marine, Major Brown, I felt that I couldn't take another step—he is so strenuous—but I conquered myself, and between it and the extra I was able to chat as though I were as 'fresh as paint,' to use a nautical expression of my husband's. I often think it is quite wonderful what we poor weak women can accomplish when duty points the way. But, say what you will, blue blood will tell."

She paused, partly through lack of breath, and partly to watch the vanguard of the tea-drinkers straggling towards the tables in the wavering, sheepish manner usual to first-comers in an empty reception-room.

Through the open archway the bazaar was in full swing. Decorated stalls named after Pretoria, Ladysmith, Kimberley, Mafeking and Colenso were doing a big trade in pen-wipers and pin-cushions. In the centre of the room the beautiful and notorious Mrs. Percival, dressed as a Kaffir girl, sat at the entrance of a miniature kraal, selling autographed photographs of Miss Edna

May and Miss Julie Opp to the officers of the fleet and garrison.

Presently Victoria and her governess walked round the stalls and on the way back paused to listen to a tall girl with a thin red mouth, like a raw wound, reciting "The Absent-minded Beggar" from the summit of a baize-covered *kopje*. She spat the words on the air with such ferocity that they sounded ragged and torn, lacerating Victoria, who felt that the first layer of her skin was being stripped off with their sharp edges.

As they came away they saw the handsome figure of Captain MacAlister coming towards them. He looked at Sheila with the newly awakened interest of a man who has suddenly found a diamond where he was accustomed to see a piece of bottle glass.

A coarse brown *jibbah* revealed her shapely arms and neck; her slender ankles and bare feet were thrust into rough leather shoes. Her unbound hair fell in curling tendrils, framing her face. She looked primitively seductive, without subtleties or worldly cunning. Rough simplicity suited her better than the whaleboned bondage of the period, which made her look like a wild poppy wired by a florist.

The man looked her boldly up and down. "You're simply ripping, quite the heathen maid. You'd have the garrison at your feet if you always wore sackcloth."

"It's no use flattering me, it's well I know what a sight I'm looking. Wait until you see me wearing my new crêpon, with 'leg of mutton' sleeves and rows of pearl buttons. It's grand I am then, I can assure you. I wore it yesterday when I waited in the gardens for you in the pouring rain."

"I never imagined you would turn out on such an

afternoon." He used the contemptuous tone meted out to the woman who shows herself over-fond.

"I wouldn't let a trifle keep me from you. I'd walk barefoot up the Strada Reale if it would please you."

"It would annoy me intensely, unless you look as you do today. Now I believe I could forgive you anything."

Sheila smiled with the triumphant tenderness of the adoring woman who hears her lover acknowledging his shackles.

Victoria, finding this kind of talk uninteresting, walked back to the darkening tea-room. Long shadows stretched from the corners, laying envious fingers on the littered table where Lieutenant and Mrs. Tresidder, Maudie and her father and mother, were finishing their tea. Mr. Tresidder's tired blue eyes sought a distant goal beyond the opal twilight; Mrs. Tresidder, austerely aggressive, darted baleful looks at the Staff-Paymaster, who was praising the Boers in a rambling, hiccuping voice. The ineffective conversational sallies of Mrs. Lancaster were unheeded; she blinked deprecatingly at the company. Maudie swept the circle with a scornful glance and helped herself to the last of the iced cakes.

II

AFTER the interlude of the bazaar the garrison reverted to the routine life of the island, overshadowed by harassing news from "the front" which trickled through with tardy monotony to this backwater of the Empire.

Throughout October and into November the sun hung like a ball of molten brass in a brazen sky and licked the yellow rocks of Malta into white irradiance. The burnt-up fields and bleached metalled roads gave back a shimmering haze resembling the hot fumes of an oven.

The sultry air made Victoria anæmic and languidly disinclined for exertion. Her pallor alarmed Mrs. Tresidder; half-remembered lessons of mothercraft and hygiene flitted illusively through her mind. Fresh air, she recollected, was a remedy for all childish ills. She congratulated herself upon her good memory, and swept Victoria and Sheila, fortified with neat packets of luncheon sandwiches, on to the sea-girt Strada It-Torri.

Morning after morning they plodded along the flat sandstone reach stretching from Tighne to St. Paul's Bay. Past bay-windowed terraces casting diversely coloured stucco in scabs which exposed the crumbling stone beneath to the derisive glitter of the sea. Thence around the point between the squalid native dwellings toward the systyle grandeur of Casa Said standing isolated on the end of the shallow spit. From a distance the glittering white façade seemed to float on the blue Mediterranean like a vast wedding cake adrift on the ocean. Beyond its mys-

terious garden walls a triangle of lavatic rock sank sluggishly into the tideless sea; a secretive barren waste unvisited except for an occasional goat browsing on sage-coloured cactus bushes, or scraping in the household junk littering the ground.

Sheila liked the remote point of unclaimed earth, but it frightened Victoria. The rotting rags, broken pans and rubbish nauseated her, the hairy arms of the withered prickly pears made her vaguely uncomfortable—reminding her of the crippled mendicant on San Giovanni steps. She thought it strange that Captain MacAlister should share this incomprehensible partiality. Since the bazaar he had joined them daily. Victoria's vague distrust of him gradually gave place to fleeting bursts of admiration. His handsome form and negligent air fascinated her. One day she threw her arms round his neck with unwonted affection, clasping his collar with warm sticky hands. He disengaged himself from her embrace with evident distaste, hurting her always sensitive feelings and re-kindling her dormant hostility. The rebuff rankled, the resentment she felt at his presence intensified; she made desperate efforts to engage Sheila's interest, hoping in this way to supplant the unwelcome soldier.

"Let's pretend that I'm an Earl and you're a Countess, and Casa Said is our house, but you've never seen it before, and you're frightfully surprised and interested. I'm going to show you the treasures inside, the gold tigers with diamond eyes, and the peacock with a tail of gleaming jewels."

"All right," said Sheila amiably. "We'll look at everything; the silver furniture and the carpets brought by Arabian merchants, and the magic dog with eyes like mill-wheels."

"Then suddenly in the dungeons we'll come across a locked door, fastened with rusty iron bars and cobwebby padlocks. There will be an enormous bang, the bars will bulge amidst blood-curdling yells, an' we expect them to snap asunder. Steam will be coming through the cracks," Victoria added as a fearful afterthought.

"You are not to think such things!" Sheila was briskly emphatic. "You frighten yourself sick with the silly fancies you have."

"They're not fancies, and they're not silly," Victoria replied mulishly. "There is a door in the dungeons, and it leads under the sea, down and down, under where we're sitting now."

"That will do. Captain MacAlister is coming along. Do you want him to know what a foolish baby you are?"

Victoria's imaginative bias towards the unpleasant was curbed by verbal reproof from Mrs. Tresidder and Sheila. A mode of correction which, by depriving her of an outlet, drove her to brood upon her fancies and muddle the real with the unreal. Her Welsh and Cornish blood carried the dark traditions of primitive peoples, and led her from the tulle-clad fairies of childhood towards the dark folklore of the Celts. This insatiable appetite had been fostered by Mr. Tresidder, to whose naturally romantic temperament had been added faith in the supernatural common to all followers of the sea. Hiding her cringing soul beneath a seemingly stolid exterior, she would listen spellbound to his inexhaustible stock of eerie and uncanny yarns. Between her fear of ridicule and her dread of the supernatural she was neatly balanced, continually throwing sops to one side or the other in the hope of maintaining a painful equilibrium.

As the month advanced Sheila's vital temperament gave place to abstracted musings which left her inert and vague. The fleet-footed girl of the summer turned into a beautiful preoccupied woman, distrait and remote. The companionship of the lonely child became insupportable to her. Gusts of anger were succeeded by storms of passionate remorse, when with straining arms encircling Victoria's pinafored body she chided herself for her unkindness: a transient mood which quickly merged into one of brooding indifference.

Victoria began to shun the lovers. Wandering amidst scattered cans shredding discoloured labels from their rusty sides, she pondered upon the alteration in Sheila, and pictured herself in a variety of heroic situations meriting her governess's gratitude. Without a qualm she cast Captain MacAlister into the sea, where he floundered, a helpless victim for a hungry whale darting in ever-narrowing circles. She visualized her graceful dive and the enormous strength with which she thrust the half-drowned man to Sheila and safety, before succumbing to the whale which considerately waited whilst she delivered a neat speech of pious resignation and bestowed blessings on those she was leaving for ever. This harrowing scene brought tears to her eyes. She pitied the repentant survivors, who would be doomed to mourn their loss for many years.

But she did not always indulge in this sacrificial attitude. For the most part her imaginary adventures were designed to show up the pinchbeck qualities of the soldier, whilst throwing into high relief her own sterling bravery which won a just reward. The finale usually depicted a glorified Victoria in a posture of proud disdain bidding Sheila choose between them. Sheila invariably chose Vic-

toria. Together they scornfully turned from the defeated Captain MacAlister standing with his back to the dying sun in the traditional attitude of Napoleon, whose costume and appearance he always mysteriously assumed.

§

Sliema Creek and the shallow slopes of Jezirah lay in a grey panorama before the windows of Mrs. Tresidder's studio; immediately below ran the Via Marina, an expanse of pale sticky mud and overflowing puddles. Beside the low coping were drawn-up lines of dilapidated *carozzi*, like small four-post beds mounted on wheels. Their sodden curtains flapped drearily in the gale, which threatened to overturn cabs and light Arab horses into the harbour. The underfed beasts leant dejectedly against the wind and rain, their long tails swept under their bellies, the brightly coloured plumes adorning their heads soaked until they resembled the single horns of unicorns. In the shelter of the landing stage their drivers huddled and lethargically expectorated into the harbour.

The sunny November day had been followed by a fortnight of cold gusty weather, when the *gregali* whistled up the harbour, tossing the water into white-edged billows that rollicked against the spidery-legged landing pier, making the crazy tin roof shake and totter. To an accompaniment of panic-stricken screams and clamour of bells, Victoria watched the ferry boat bump against the floating stage before it puffed to safe anchorage in the lee of a moored destroyer. She turned her back upon the depressing outlook.

The studio was comfortable enough; a mixture of middle-class England grudgingly interspersed with necessaries of the island. The plain plastered walls were

thickly covered with signed photographs of peculiar-looking women and long-haired men; with apparently unfinished crayon drawings which belied their appearance by being carefully framed, whilst very finished oil paintings were not framed at all. Any spaces between were filled by open fans nailed up sideways, and terra-cotta plaques with flowers painted upon them. In one corner was a fireplace with a shaped mantel-board and sunflower embroidered valance of art serge.

Standing on a round table in the centre of the room was a shiny photograph of Queen Victoria, in a gilt frame bearing the Royal Cipher. Under her signature the Queen had written "1837-1897." Her sleekly parted hair was half covered by a lace veil surmounted by a tiny perched-up crown; lace fell in a cascade over her left arm and partly concealed the Garter ribbon. Her black velvet dress was protected by a lace apron; about her neck and wrists were heavy jewels, and in her hand was an open fan. Around this picture ranged lesser ones, showing the Duke of Albany and Prince Christian Victor of Schleswig-Holstein as Highlanders; an enlarged group of the Tsar's visit to Balmoral in 1896, and a small photograph of the Queen taken in a pony-shay, beneath which was written: "To dear Gwyneth Lloyd. Grasse—1891." In front of all the pictures was a small brass image of Buddha with neatly braided hair, and wearing a skirt. Victoria thought it represented the Queen in her bath, but diffidence prevented her making certain of this.

Mrs. Tresidder was working at the detail of a large canvas for which Victoria sat when the light was good. The artist was adding a shaggy coat to the meagre outline of a masquerader which was impersonating the inevitable St. Bernard. The model, a nondescript mongrel balanced

on the stumpy legs of the ill-bred, was happily drowsing in front of the smouldering fire.

Victoria was contemplating the wasp-like waists and prominent busts of the younger Royal ladies with misgiving.

"How shall I have a waist when I grow up?"

"It will come, dear."

"But supposing it doesn't, and I stay all straight up and down?"

"Your waist will be twenty-one inches—all the Lloyds have the same waist measurement." Mrs. Tresidder spoke with finality.

Slowly Victoria digested this tough morsel of family tradition.

"I suppose it is one of the things that happen with being grown up—like knowing you're a Conservative, and never being sick."

"Yes, dear, but we don't talk about 'being sick.' If such a misfortune should occur, a gentlewoman would describe it as having a little headache."

Victoria turned from the Court circle to gaze at the celebrities hanging on the closely packed walls. They suggested another line of thought.

"Did any of these funny men want to marry you?" she inquired with interest.

"Some of them."

"Why didn't you?" she demanded with the probing directness of childhood.

"Because I preferred your father," Mrs. Tresidder answered in a prudish and unconvincing tone.

"I don't *think* I shall get married, but I might try it to see what it is like, then if the man was nasty I should go."

Despite the rakish assembly on her walls Mrs. Tresidder experienced a thrill of dismay at Victoria's frankly Bohemian outlook.

"When you are older and wiser you will understand the wickedness of what you have said. Don't you remember the Prayer Book tells us, 'Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder'?"

"If I made a mistake I wouldn't trouble God about it. I'd set it right my own self."

"My child, I'm surprised at your thoughts."

"But, Mummy, when you found the desk you bought in the Strada Mercanti was worm-eaten, you didn't keep it—you sent it back to the man who deceived you."

"Well?"

"So you see if I got a husband who pretended to be real when he wasn't, I wouldn't keep him either."

"You had better stay in your room until you know the difference between husbands and desks. I am grieved beyond measure that my teaching has given you so little idea of religion."

The note of distress in her mother's voice touched Victoria's soft heart. With a hazy understanding of her transgression, she flung apologetic arms around Mrs. Tresidder's neck, only to be put aside with adamant displeasure.

In the solitude of her bedroom Victoria meditated upon her sins throughout the dreary afternoon. The rain lashed the window in angry gusts, running down the panes in cascades through which the landscape looked jagged and the houses strangely crippled.

Later her father and mother came upstairs to dress for the opera. She waited for them to come in and say good night, and experienced a chill disappointment when

they passed her door without opening it. Presently she heard the gate slam and the bells of the *carozzi* getting fainter and fainter. She realized with shudders that she was alone in the house, defenceless against the foes that lurked in the shadowy corners and gained strength with the waning light.

Sheila had gone out after lunch, furtively, into the driving rain. She had built a barrier of cold dislike between them, a mature weapon of politeness which stirred Victoria's childish intelligence into dull resentment. She solaced her smarting feelings by rudeness and ungracious manners, at the same time keeping faith with Sheila's unspoken request for silence. There were many nights when she saw her governess streak noiselessly down the stone stairs, past the lighted drawing-room door, out into the starlit night. Hours later Victoria, waiting wide-eyed in the darkness, would hear the bolts of the front door shot home, and her parents coming up to bed. The cracked church bells struck many quarters before a smothered knock called her from bed. She would scuttle downstairs, clutching her nightgown and looking fearfully over her shoulder; then, mounting a chair, she tussled with the obdurate bolts.

§

Victoria undressed herself and sat bolt upright and tense on the pillow of her mosquito-curtained bed, feeling surprised that anything so awful could have happened to her. Her right hand clasped a bare foot, her left kept a firm grip of the wooden stretcher of the mattress, and held at bay the spirits and bogies that menaced her from the darkness. To make doubly sure of safety she repeated the Lord's Prayer over and over in a half-whisper, taking

care not to say the Amen which finished the prayer and left her open to attack. She derived much comfort from this mixture of paganism and religion. As she chanted, she watched night sweeping down, blotting out the spire of St. Paul's Church perched on the rocky promontory across the creek, and thence swooping downwards to engulf harbour, ships, and the buildings round Marsamuscetto in a uniform smudge of black. One by one the scattered lights of Valletta showed up against the sky, like sprinklings from a fairy pepper-pot; far below points of gold outlined the ferry landing. The Morse signals flashed from the mastheads of destroyers moored in the stream; uncurtained scuttles and illuminated gangways sent long shaking tracks towards the shore, to be lost in the massed reflections cast from the drinking bars on the Via Marina.

Victoria's terror increased with each second. The house was filled with a mysterious undercurrent of sound; furniture made sharp noises that stabbed the dark, rustlings came through the black oblong of an open door, and strange creakings ascended from the floor beneath. She drew her breath in sobbing gasps and huddled in the farthest corner of the bed, clutching the curtains around her. The knowledge that the front door was open to the street did not lessen her fears; she pictured it stealthily opening to admit the diseased beggar from San Giovanni, or the idiot who mended chairs on the pavement of Strada San Giuseppe. She screamed when she actually heard the big door slowly turn on its hinges, and as slowly close. Faltering steps ascended the stairs and paused on the landing. Wide-eyed she watched the door. Through the opening a figure came, draggled like a maimed bird,

and sobbing pitifully. Victoria forgot her fears, she leapt out of bed and enclosed Sheila in her cold little arms whilst uttering odd grown-up words of comfort.

"He's gone, never coming back any more!" Sheila moaned. "I'll have to go on without him all my life—perhaps for years and years."

"People have to go on alone." Victoria spoke in an unchildish voice.

"I cannot, I must be loved—or die!"

"We'll get him back in the morning if you want him so much." Victoria leapt from the visionary to the practical with disconcerting suddenness.

"He's gone from my life for good. His face was cruel—so cruel, and he said things which no man could say to a woman he loved."

"I should forget him if I were you," Victoria counselled. "You were much happier in the summer before he came to bother us."

"I didn't know what happiness meant. You're only a child, you don't understand anything. Nobody was ever so lonely as I!"

Victoria passed over the injustice of the remark. "You can write him a letter in the morning." To her the written word was a talisman possessing mysterious powers.

Sheila's only response was another storm of tears, whereupon Victoria assumed a quaintly motherly air, alternately chiding and comforting. She took off Sheila's wet clothes, brushed her long tangled hair and dabbed her face with eau-de-Cologne filched from Mrs. Tresidder's drawer.

When the governess was safely in bed the child re-

turned to her room and snuggled contentedly under the clothes. For the moment her happiness at being restored to favour eclipsed the terrors of night. She went to sleep to dream of Sheila and Captain MacAlister sitting on the edge of two pale moons whilst she brought them a sack of pointed stars in a *carozzi*.

III

MRS. TRESIDDER was making coffee at the breakfast table with the preoccupied air of one who knows herself to be mistress of the intricate art. She knew, as only the daughter of an Anglo-Egyptian can know, exactly how it should be done. It was vain for her husband to protest that he would rather drink an inferior coffee which was hot than a super-beverage which was tepid. She was convinced that she knew what he wanted better than he knew himself.

Whilst eating a hurried breakfast Lieutenant Tresidder propped *The Malta Chronicle* against the marmalade jar in order to read the war bulletins. Victoria, who was fastidious over her food, sat looking at the fried egg chilling on her plate. If forced into eating semi-cooked eggs she preferred them basted on the top, the yolk disguised with a decent film of white. Reposing in front of her was an egg blatantly yellow, with a glutinous coating that stuck to the knife like melted gelatine.

"Eat your egg, Victoria." Mrs. Tresidder poured the coffee slowly through a muslin sieve.

"May I eat the edge without the middle?"

"No, you must eat it all. There is more nutriment in the yolk than in the white."

"I can't eat the middle, it is sticky, and wobbles when I shake the plate."

"There is no necessity for you to move your plate off the table. Eat the egg at once, and be a good girl."

Victoria made a tentative cut at the edge of the white and better done portion. She felt so happy that even the

prospect of swallowing the nauseous yolk failed to damp her spirits. She looked forward to long walks up the island roads with Sheila, past the small flat-roofed houses, with their minute walled fields of different-coloured crops; past herds of goats walking with jangling bells; past orange trees and olive groves.

Accustomed to the quickly healed wounds of childhood, she credited Sheila with an equally short memory. Now that Captain MacAlister had gone she expected the cloud over Sheila's happiness to disperse, and the old harmony restored. When her governess slipped into her place at the table her white face and heavy eyes gave the child an uncomfortable jar. Sleep had removed into the vague past Victoria's recollection of last night's vigil. Sheila's face unpleasantly restored it into the immediate present.

"Don't you feel well?" asked Mrs. Tresidder.

"Not very. I couldn't sleep, the wind was blowing against my window all night. It kept me awake."

"I should say you've a touch of fever." Mr. Tresidder looked up from the paper. "If you people will drink goat's milk, you've only yourselves to blame."

"My dear Lionel, you must give me credit for a little common sense. I have been used to goat's milk all my life, Welsh people have thrived on it for generations, and you must admit that I, as a Welshwoman, should know more about goats than you who have been accustomed to cows all your life."

"Tinned cow, my dear."

"That's neither here nor there, except that in my opinion condensed milk is very injurious to the constitution."

"It's better than goat's milk in Malta. You cannot compare the Welsh pasturage with the garbage these

beasts feed upon. But go your own way by all means, only don't say when you are all down with fever that I didn't warn you." He helped himself to marmalade with the detached air of a man who has registered a protest of duty and is exonerated from further obligation.

Mr. Tresidder's interest in his family was of an abstract nature; he could never bring himself to feel that he was responsible for their welfare. It was as if fate had thrust an unsought burden upon him, which chivalry forced him to shoulder. Only when he raked in the ashes of his youth did he remember the fleeting flame of passion. As years passed he found it increasingly difficult to recapture the illusive atmosphere of romance; results remained; but the emotions which had evoked them were so dimmed that he might have been looking back upon the feelings of a stranger. At first this distressed him. He felt as if he had mislaid something dearly loved, and sought for it vainly through the chambers of his mind, then tried to persuade himself that what he looked for was never really there, but was a silver mirage in which one lived through youth and young maturity and lost in contact with the world. Now, months would pass without this other self tugging at his memory, and when it did return he thrust it roughly aside, assuring himself that he preferred the smug ease of material well-being to the old yearnings and bygone raptures. He feigned interest in the petty details of married life, in the dull dregs of domesticity, the delinquencies of servants, garrison gossip, and the foreshortened outlook of women. That he failed was not for want of trying, but rather that he was preoccupied, a seeker after unfulfilled dreams.

"The old girl seems to be failing," he remarked in a tone of conciliation.

"I don't know whom you mean," his wife replied in a chilly voice.

Many years of married life had taught him that it was well to disregard feminine intonation if you wished peaceably to sail on the turbid waters of matrimony. And he wanted peace very much indeed. It gave him time to think things out, to ponder upon the tangle of life. So he answered equably: "Queen Victoria."

"It seems strange to hear you, one of Her Majesty's paid servants, speaking in a way which would be disrespectful were it applied to an aged beggar. But perhaps I am prejudiced. Knowing the Queen personally, I respect her as a woman as well as a Sovereign."

"I expect you're right, my dear. You were always a stickler for pomp and ceremony. I should have thought she would have liked to be called 'Old girl.' It sounds more friendly; put her on a homely plane, with ordinary people." He rose from the table, and turned as he was going through the door.

"You'd better ask MacAlister to dinner if you want to see him before he leaves. The Borderers have sailing orders for Durban and are being relieved by a Militia battalion which landed last night. There's a rumour at the Club that he's got engaged to the eldest Allison girl."

Victoria looked across at Sheila—she remembered the girl had recited at the bazaar at the *auberge*. She thought of her scarlet mouth, like a raw wound. But the Allison girl was not wounded, it was Sheila, whose face wore the livid hue of death.

§

The weeks which followed were dull and uneventful. Foreboding ran through them, a feeling that the seeming

monotony would be broken by a sudden eruption destroying the thin crust of security.

Christmas came, and Victoria hung up one of her mother's stockings. Awakening in the grey morning she lifted the bulging weight and felt pleasantly awed as she thrust her arm into the magic depths. She wondered what she would do if her hand closed on the warm rotundity of a baby fairy. Earnestly she had petitioned for the gift, adding it to her prayers, crediting the Almighty with a surveillance over fairyland which would have shocked her mother's orthodoxy. Mrs. Tresidder drew as firm a line between religion and magic as a good Churchwoman should. It was not her fault that Victoria dovetailed the two teachings instead of keeping them in the separate compartments which they should occupy in Christian minds.

The enthusiasm of the morning merged into the uncomfortable hours succeeding dinner, when the joys of anticipation were over and tradition prevented the resumption of the workaday round. They sat beside the fire in replete idleness, awaiting with misgivings the next meal which would break the monotony of the festal day.

That evening Sheila made a diversion by fainting, falling suddenly off her chair and striking her head against the sharp point of the fender. They carried her to the sofa, where she lay inert, with blood trickling down her drawn face.

Mrs. Tresidder sent for the Maltese doctor from the corner, remarking that Sheila could not expect to be attended by a Naval Surgeon when she was not in the Service. Victoria pondered upon this, remembering that when her throat was sore in the summer, she had been visited by the Fleet-Surgeon from Bighi.

The doctor, an oily man, exhaling warm odours of garlic, was reassuring, and bantered Sheila slyly upon over-indulgence in Christmas fare. He assisted her up the flight of stone stairs to her room, and was amiably anxious to put her to bed, until prevented by Mrs. Tresidder, who unaccountably vowed that he should never set foot in her house again. Victoria, feeling uncomfortably responsible for her mother's ingratitude, watched his large bald head with its carefully arranged strands of greasy hair bobbingly descend the stairs accompanied by a bulbous jumping shadow on the wall. The clash of the front door jarred through the silent house, cut off all hope of reconciliation and saddled her mother with the guilt of unrepented churlishness.

Sheila was up again on Boxing Day, looking pale, but otherwise herself. If she was quieter than she used to be, no one was aware of it except Victoria. They settled again into a dull routine, and jogging along in an uninspired manner the monotonous days soon passed into the grey retrospect of forgotten things.

IV

SO far as Victoria was concerned, the news of the Queen's death made a welcome interruption, but her mother was so shocked by the calamity that she was obliged to leave her breakfast untasted. Victoria, not wishing to appear behindhand in loyalty, left her breakfast too, and then wandered disconsolately through the undusted rooms, looking as grief-stricken as she could, sighing very deeply and often.

Experiencing little enjoyment in acting a make-believe melancholy to an inanimate audience of chairs and tables, she betook herself to the kitchen, where she manufactured such dismal sighs and groans for the benefit of Josepha that the kindly woman took her on her lap and commenced to rub her stomach in the belief that so noisy a sorrow could be the result of one cause only. Victoria, deeply resenting the liberty taken with her person and annoyed that her lamentations for a departed monarch could be misjudged, stalked in dudgeon from the kitchen, spurning Josepha's well-meant offer of peppermint.

In her mother's room she found full scope for her theatrical bent. Mrs. Tresidder lay prostrate on her unmade bed, a circumstance which made the scene more convincing and matched the weak voice in which she asked for eau-de-Cologne. Victoria enjoyed herself immensely. She pulled down all the blinds, and sat beside the bed dabbing the sufferer's forehead with scent and water.

Mrs. Tresidder, possessing her quantum of the Welsh

dramatic instinct, soon felt as genuinely ill as the occasion warranted. She prepared to spend the day in her room, nursing her grief and planning a mourning outfit for herself and Victoria. Sheila was instructed to fetch patterns of crêpe and dull-faced cloth from Bartoli Galea's, also a string of large jet beads. Meanwhile they got through the morning in the semi-gloom of the untidy room, Victoria assiduously placing fresh compresses on her mother's head and officiously ordering off the servant who came to make the bed.

When Sheila returned at midday with a large box of patterns, she appeared oblivious to the solemnity of the occasion and was inclined to view the death of the Queen as an event of small magnitude. This attitude disgruntled Victoria, who had spent the whole morning in working up a loyal dolour. She decided to have her lunch on a tray in her mother's room, to show Sheila what a faithful nurse she was and how she and her mother were one in a joint bereavement. It was disconcerting to see her governess sit down to her lunch without noticing such filial devotion, reinforced by the added discomfort of eating a badly needed meal in the stuffy twilight of an unaired bedroom.

She heard Sheila go out, and listened, with jealous longing for the freedom which pride forbade her taking, to the footsteps fading in the distance. The afternoon stretched in front of her like slowly extended elastic; the longer she sat quiet the more the minutes ahead pulled themselves out.

Mrs. Tresidder fell into fitful sleep from which she awakened herself by genteel little snores which seemed to surprise her very much and which she disguised by deprecating and equally genteel little coughs.

The dull morning had turned into a wan grey afternoon. Banks of dark clouds piled themselves on the horizon and presently poured down hailstones which drummed on the window in an urgent tattoo.

Mrs. Tresidder roused herself for tea and they had a comparatively cheerful meal of hot buttered toast.

"Who will be the Queen now?" asked Victoria, who had but a hazy idea of the Royal succession.

"We shall have a King, our dear Queen's eldest son, the Prince of Wales. I will pour you out another cup of tea, then we will both drink to the health of our new Sovereign."

Mrs. Tresidder, in a red flannel dressing-gown and her hair in a pig-tail, stood up impressively with her cup raised.

"Long life to His Gracious Majesty King Edward the Seventh of England and Wales and the Dominions beyond the seas, Emperor of India, and Defender of the Faith."

Characteristically she curtailed and graded the Royal domain. If the usual title "King of Great Britain" embraced the unconquered kingdom of Scotland she would be no party to the inclusion. She refused to countenance the arrogant Scot with his vainglorious references to Bannockburn; likewise she banished the rebellious Irish as being of little credit to the Crown. "King of England and Wales" was good enough for her, and was doubtless the title preferred by the monarch.

Whilst Mrs. Tresidder tabulated the Empire in her rich contralto, Victoria, feeling herself a representative subject, sipped her weak tea with the solemnity of a votary embracing a new allegiance.

This little ceremony revived their spirits, and Mrs.

Tresidder proposed a game of dominoes. Within the firelit room the comfort was accentuated by the sound of the storm without and the noisy gurgling of a faulty gutter above the window. Victoria's bedtime passed without notice. Like a conspirator with time, Victoria watched the hands of the clock reach down to half-past seven.

The serenity was broken by Lieutenant Tresidder, who came in at the front door and let in a squall of rain. Small gusts of wind chased each other round the room and blew so derisively upon the framed celebrities hanging on the walls that they nearly shivered to the ground.

An oppressive smell of wet indigo cloth and pegamoid emanated from the sailor. The top of his cap was spangled with moisture, a fringe of drops rimmed the peak. Little rivulets raced each other down his coat and dripped sadly on to the floor, forming round dark pools.

Mrs. Tresidder, who had exchanged her homely dressing-gown for an exotic-looking robe of embossed velvet, wearily put aside the dominoes.

"You have chilled the atmosphere by about twenty degrees," she complained. "Why you cannot take off your wet clothes in the hall provided for the purpose I really fail to imagine—but I am too exhausted to care." She leant her head limply against the sofa cushions.

"Have you had a good mope?" her husband asked, his face puckered into an almost boyish look of glee.

It suddenly struck Victoria that her father possessed a staunch sincerity lacking in her mother, and the discovery made her deeply ashamed of her part in the day's lamentations. She ran across the room and threw her arms round his neck.

"I do love you!" she said, kissing his wet cheek.

"I have just gone through a very sad and trying day," Mrs. Tresidder answered her husband. "I don't know why your curious remark to me should occasion this outburst of affection from Victoria. But you understand each other, I dare say. Even if I am only her mother, I can suggest that it is quite time she went to bed. As it is so late, Vic, you can tell Sheila that you will have your bath in the morning."

Mrs. Tresidder icily held her cheek for her daughter to kiss. Victoria, who was something of a philosopher, was not greatly perturbed by the swift change of grown-up moods. Whilst enjoying basking in Olympian favour, she nevertheless kept a prophetic eye on the emotional blizzard to follow.

Trailing slowly up the two flights of stairs to the nursery, she found the upper flat in darkness save for the faint illumination coming from the lamps around the harbour. The wet window-panes distorted these lights into blurry yellow circles. Victoria found that by looking through half-closed lids she could make each lamp expand and contract in the most fascinating manner. She spent five minutes in this way, alike forgetful of her errand and the fears which usually haunted her at night-time.

She then explored each darkened room, feeling in the corners and even poking under beds, calling Sheila by name the while. Fear, which had been in abeyance, suddenly swooped upon her, so that her heart seemed to rise and suffocatingly beat in her throat. She sped down the stairs, with feet scarcely touching, to the haven of the warm, lighted hall. The hot smell of cooking was strangely reassuring, and partly obliterated the lonely

impression left by the bleak upper story. Slowly she opened the dining-room door and walked over to her governess's vacant place at the table.

"Sheila's not upstairs, an' it's all dark. I felt in the wardrobe an' her hat's not there." Victoria gave a little gasp as she announced her discovery. To speak of it brought misgiving appreciably nearer. Like a thin miasma the chill atmosphere of the nursery seemed to creep into the lighted room.

"She must have gone to the post. It is very inconsiderate of her to go out just at dinner-time. Sheila is not half so thoughtful as she used to be. I've noticed it for a long time." Mrs. Tresidder put some meat on a clean plate, and a liberal helping of vegetables. Then she rang the bell. She was always just and thoughtful concerning the material needs of her dependents.

Salvina, the parlourmaid, slid into the room sideways, and kept an oblique and apprehensive eye upon Mrs. Tresidder. Her attitude indicated that in a recent foray she had been the vanquished. Mrs. Tresidder's bland manner bore out this assumption.

"Please keep Miss Doran's dinner hot. Place it in the contrivance which Josepha calls the oven."

"Ar right!" said Salvina dispassionately.

"What time did Miss Doran go out?" asked Mr. Tresidder.

"Miss Doran not been in since lunch. Do not think she come back ever!" announced Salvina.

"What makes you say that?" Mrs. Tresidder was shocked out of her blandness and spoke sharply.

"She gave me her best white dress for my wedding, and all the money in her tin box. Her not come back." Salvina darted a triumphant and meaning glance at Mrs.

Tresidder. "Miss Doran very big now." She held her clasped hands away from her body in a gesture that was significant.

Mrs. Tresidder's poise seemed to crumple up. Her outraged feelings were displayed by the red tide mounting to her forehead.

"That will do, Salvina, you can pack your box at once!" She hurled this Western ultimatum at the victorious Maltese, whose worldly possessions, with the exception of the recently acquired wedding-gown, could easily be accommodated in a moderately large handkerchief.

"Ar right!" answered Salvina, still carrying the plate of congealing food.

Salvina left an atmosphere of embarrassment behind her. The gusto she had shown in announcing a circumstance unnoticed by Mrs. Tresidder had brought reality and primitive emotions under her mistress's carefully shaded lamps, and was an overwhelming affront to her cultivated modesty. Had Mrs. Tresidder analysed her thoughts, she would have discovered that she demanded a carnal vacuity in all spinsters, irrespective of age. If they were unfortunate enough to continue in their single state until the Biblical term of life, she would have expected them to be contented with the explanations which had sufficed their infant curiosity. She would have seen nothing incongruous in a white-haired woman meeting death in the simple belief that a Germanic stork had deposited her in a bundle upon the parental doorstep seventy years before.

Mrs. Tresidder had so systematically ignored the grosser side of life that its sudden presentment startled her as much as if Salvina had given her a slap in the face. She was profoundly shocked that the young governess possessed desires which she had contrived to gratify in

her employer's time and had been capable of a double-dealing incredible in an unmarried woman.

Whilst she was dwelling upon the injuries to her susceptibilities Mr. Tresidder was exploring a new mental strata. Unlike his wife, he possessed no positive conviction as to the infallibility of his judgment. His tenets were continually in flux. He was well aware that he was utterly unfitted to judge any one, and was only capable of extending a profound sympathy to the wayfarer whose stumbling path converged upon his own.

Going out into the hall he slipped off his shoes and walked over the cold tiled floor to the cupboard where his boots were kept. He groped about in the dark for them, and struck his head against a shelf. The blow intensified his disgust at the futility and cruelty of the world and his resentment at being an unwilling pawn in the game of life.

He struggled into his wet, dankly smelling coat, and fastened the collar tightly about his neck. On the table beside his cap he noticed a box with a gaping lid. He put his hand curiously inside and drew out a long streamer of crêpe. Accepting the omen with Cornish fatalism, he folded the cloth neatly round his hand, and replaced it reverently.

§

It was eleven o'clock on the morning following Sheila's disappearance. Victoria had counted each of the intervening twenty-one hours, always certain that her governess would be knocking at the door ere the clocks struck again.

By fixing an appointment with fate Victoria felt that she definitely clinched the time of Sheila's coming. The hours of night piled up until pale dawn trickled through

the slats of the shutters and made white ladders up the bedroom walls, but no knock had shattered the silence.

In spite of the many disappointments, her faith in a smiling Omnipotence with a benign bias towards herself remained unshaken; she was positive that, given a last chance, Providence would redeem its moral pledge. Eager to witness the vindication, she took her stand at the window overlooking the road followed by Sheila yesterday: a road whispering with empty echoes alert to catch the sound of nearing steps, a road leading to the sea and secretive Casa Said.

From her point of vantage she was able to see simultaneously the occupants of both opposite houses as the square window projecting over the larger of the two front doors had been divided at some time by a matchboard partition which separated one pane of glass into two. On the left a young husband and wife enjoyed a cramped Elysium in company with a tuneful canary in a gilt cage; on the right the corpulent figure of a Maltese matron wedged the embrasure.

Into the empty sunlit street shuffled an old mendicant woman dressed in browny-green rags and the remnants of a rusty faldetta. She leant against the wall between the doors of the opposite houses and looked across at Victoria. Raising a taloned hand imploringly, she broke into a monotonous high-pitched plaint: "Me Miserubbly, Miserubbly . . ."

Down the steep gradient a herd of goats straggled, led by the tawny-coloured beast selected to supply the needs of the Tresidders' household. A white nanny detached itself from the band and sprang on to the doorstep below the tuneful canary. Filthy hands of a youthful drover coaxed milk into a small jam jar, as with red-rimmed

bleary eyes the nanny looked towards the harbour, foolishly wagging its bearded lower jaw. The remainder of the herd fought each other for scraps of garbage in the roadway, agile and nimble in spite of distended purple-veined udders which bumped against their straddling legs. Presently they pattered off to a pleasant accompaniment of jangling bells, passing from the narrow side street to the wide Via Marina. The beggar woman, engulfed in the ruins of her shapeless faldetta, hobbled in the rear—a knot of dun-coloured rags creeping through the dust.

As the first stroke of twelve reverberated from the campanile of the Cathedral a Holy Father in a brown habit passed by. The sun glinted upon his shaven head, and on the metal crucifix swinging from the girdle encircling his massive waist.

Victoria could hear wheels bumping a vehicle towards her on the uneven road—she leant her head against the cool glass of the window to obtain a longer, slanting view of the hill. A green-painted hand-barrow, with a rear balustrade for holding vegetables, creaked its impetuous way down the incline, held back by the gracefully poised bodies of two men who clung with strong hairy hands to the shafts. Their faded dungarees were saturated and lapped about their limbs; as they dug their toes into the ground, little clouds of dust rose and settled in a fine white powder on the olive of their skins and encrusted the jagged wounds scarring their bare feet.

In the body of the cart where the pumpkins and cauliflowers should have been was a large sack-covered hump resting in the midst of a spreading pool. From this apparently soaking burden a thin trickle of water marked the trail of its zigzag course down the hill.

The toiling men took the last and steepest yards of the gradient at a run, guiding the swiftly rolling barrow in a sweeping curve round the corner of the house.

As the door-bell clanged, so the last stroke of twelve died slowly on the air and passed like a sigh out to sea.

V

THEY passed out of the steamy atmosphere of the tea-shop into the cool air of the Strada Reale. A dark velvety sky, dotted with pale stars, formed an arched canopy between tall houses. Shafts of orange light lanced the darkness; a string of Chinese lanterns like a row of magic moons hung in front of the Opera House; beyond, the black archways of the Porta Reale trembled in the flickering light of two unshaded gas-jets.

Mrs. Lancaster, Maudie, and Victoria stood in the road outside the confectioner's, undecided which way to take. On the left was the office of Mr. Thomas Cook; the grand façade of the Opera House and the railway station; on the right brightly illuminated shops converged in a golden point at Fort St. Elmo.

"There's no doubt the lanterns advertising *Rigoletto* are a great improvement to the scene. They take one's eyes off the gloomy outline of the Porta Reale. It positively gives me the shivers to go under it, reminds me of traitors under Temple Bar . . . Guy Fawkes or somebody like that. I've always felt the same about arches ever since I was a girl. I can't give a reason for it, of course. When Mr. Lancaster and I were first engaged, Papa and Mamma took me down to the George Hotel at Portsmouth, and on the afternoon of our arrival it was arranged we were to take tea with my fiancé, whose ship was lying in dry-dock. We walked along The Hard towards the dockyard, taking our time, as we were not

to be there until four o'clock, and it was then only twenty minutes to the hour . . . or was it that we were due at twenty minutes to four and it was then only half-past three? I can't remember, I'm sure. Maudie, you are not to sigh and hunch your shoulder! Who is that man saluting you?"

"The Gunnery Lieutenant of the *Renown*."

"Very good-looking, a two-and-a-half striper, and the specialists get splendid pay. If we stay here he may pass again, then you can introduce him and I'll invite him to tea." Mrs. Lancaster looked abstractedly across the road, thinking of food. "We'll have Bizzazi's cream buns this time. Well, as I was telling you before you interrupted me, Papa, Mamma, and I strolled quietly along The Hard, looking into the quaint marine stores as we passed, when suddenly in front of me I saw a tall arched entrance, one big opening in the centre and two smaller ones on either side. It was enough for me! I said, 'Mamma, much as I adore Henry, I cannot go to him through those awful gates.' Papa was angry, but I was firm. I persuaded them to board the ship and tell Henry of my plight. Meanwhile I sat on top of a rounded block, like a milestone, just outside the gates. The police on guard were most sympathetic, and the sergeant lent me a paper called *Ally Sloper*. When Mr. Lancaster came out, in uniform of course, he took in the situation at a glance. Sweeping me off the milestone into a passing cab, he drove me with all speed to a pier where we found a waterman who rowed us in a dirty boat to some steps in the dockyard. I don't deny that I felt very ill before I got there, but I was full of pluck, and chatted vivaciously to my fiancé, although my inside felt quite inverted."

Mrs. Lancaster brought her reminiscences to a close,

having sighted, far down the street, the returning figure of the *Renown's* Gunnery Lieutenant.

"Now, Maudie, we'll just glance into this window, as if we were looking for some special cake, then as he comes 'athwart our bows,' as your father would say, we can turn round in the most natural manner. Vic, take hold of my hand, and point at those chocolates with your other one."

Victoria did as she was told, pointing a dirty little forefinger at some grey-looking bars, broken to show bright pink interiors.

Mrs. Lancaster waited tensely, relying upon Maudie to signal the vital moment for the evolution. Maudie sucked in her cheek to display her dimple and prepared to look archly under her eyelashes.

"Now!" she said.

They swung round on their heels, like parts of some well-oiled machine.

"We've missed him, he's ahead on the other side of the street—if he goes into the Club we're done!" Mrs. Lancaster hitched her trailing skirts in one hand, and started in pursuit.

Victoria brought up the rear, a quaint figure in a green serge coat cut like a miniature highwayman's with tiers of capes. A white silk scarf was wound tightly about her neck and tied in a bow beneath her chin; the silk was limp and dirty because nobody had thought of washing it during her five days' visit to Mrs. Lancaster.

With suspicious rapidity Victoria's banishment to Valletta followed the incident of the handcart and its dripping burden.

Mrs. Tresidder, dressed in her hat and coat, had hurriedly entered the room, carrying a small leather bag and Victoria's outdoor clothing.

"We're going to catch the ferry. Your father and I think it a good opportunity for you to spend a few days with Maudie. She has asked you so often." Victoria received the announcement with the ill-concealed scepticism of childhood.

"Where's Sheila?" she demanded.

"She's gone on a long journey," came the soothing reply.

Upon their arrival at the Strada Britannica the whispering conference between her mother and Mrs. Lancaster confirmed her disbelief in the validity of the invitation. She felt herself a small defenceless atom floating upon the vast sea of grown-up subterfuge.

From a truckle-bed in the corner of Maudie's room Victoria watched the brushing of saturated locks round a circular ruler which converted straight hair into curls. She assisted when Maudie attempted to improve the contour of her nose by inserting the tip between the open prongs of a clothes-peg, and was held responsible for the inflamed condition of the button-like feature. Despite these interesting experiences, she welcomed the idea of returning home, and the termination of an unjust banishment. Both Mrs. Lancaster and Maudie had been kind in their own way; they had given Victoria the pleasures which they themselves enjoyed. That she failed to respond was neither their fault nor hers, but due to the disparity of their temperaments.

§

Mrs. Lancaster and Maudie, who had disguised their race down the Strada Reale by the ultra gentility of their demeanour, slowed down as their uncaught quarry passed into the sanctuary of the Club's great doorway.

"I've said before, and I say again, it is a scandal

women are not allowed in the Club." Mrs. Lancaster was emphatic in her indignation.

"If you'd kept to the road instead of walking on the crowded footpath, we should have done it," said Maudie.

"Well, it can't be helped—I shall ask him to tea anyway." Mrs. Lancaster turned affably to Victoria. "I'm sure you'd like to help us choose the ribbon for Maudie's new frock. As we are dining with your mother we pass the shop on the way to the ferry."

Turning into one of the steep narrow streets connecting the Strada Reale with the Strada Stretta, they plunged into an ill-lit shop smelling of Manchester goods, unwashed bodies, and food cooked in oil.

Mrs. Lancaster and Maudie hung over a box of ribbons, seeking the right shade of pink to tone with Maudie's complexion.

"This is the one, dear. You can rely upon my taste because I have more French blood than you have, although you are so fond of setting your judgment against mine. Six yards will be sufficient." Mrs. Lancaster complacently handed the roll to the swarthy assistant, who unwound a few inches of bright ribbon and a long spiral of paper.

"Only half a yard? How unfortunate! Look, Maudie, this pretty blue is just the one to show up the colour of your eyes. Only a quarter of a yard left? What a pity, and the others are too dark for a young girl. Here is a yellow satin—quite sweet."

"You told me the other day that yellow wasn't my colour. What is the sense of buying things we don't want?"

"I'm sure you're mistaken, Maudie; I never could have said such a thing. Your great-great-grandmother—the Princess you have heard me speak of, Vic—always wore

yellow. A very Continental colour, I think. We'll decide upon six yards. I wonder what your aunt at Streatham would say to a shop like this, Maudie, but then she will only patronize the West End stores. Society women are so cliqué."

They shut the door upon the sickly odours, and plunged once more into the star-spangled night. The narrow footpath took the steep gradient in a series of shallow steps that seemed to descend into the mysterious depths of some dark, sinister gully. Multiple lines of washing joined above the Strada San Marco, hanging from poles extending beyond the tiers of balcony windows on either side. The linen flapping uneasily in the fetid air showed glimpses of deep blue sky and the serene disc of the moon.

§

Victoria entered her mother's familiar studio with a sense of strangeness engendered by the few days' absence. The air was charged with secret, complex emotions vainly trying to articulate and explain themselves. Even the inanimate objects seemed to be just a little different from her remembrance of them. She moved softly about, fingering favourite ornaments and the portraits of the Royal family with their suggestion of solid security, hoping to re-establish herself amongst them.

Maudie was ensconced in a corner, absorbed in a book of theatre programmes and autographed pictures of theatrical celebrities. Mr. and Mrs. Tresidder sat with their guest beneath the red shade of a standard lamp. Mrs. Lancaster, who habitually held her head a little on one side, darted rapid glances from round beady eyes, like a perky robin on the look out for the proverbial early worm. The pouched front of her scarlet glacé silk blouse, and

the highly faced cloth of her brown skirt, carried out the illusion. Although she had worn this costume since morning, she contrived to make Mrs. Tresidder's sage-coloured evening gown look soiled and unsuitable; a superiority in finesse which gave her a temporary ascendancy over the position and talents of her hostess. Dependent upon the precarious generosity of a dissipated spouse, she thought Providence had been over-bounteous in granting Mrs. Tresidder a self-earned income in addition to an exemplary husband entitled to the coveted curl. She contrived to keep her feelings within bounds, remembering that an artist on the Royal visiting list is a valuable acquisition to the social climber.

"Maudie will be heartbroken at losing dear little Vic. I think it is delightful to see two girls of different ages so devoted to one another—indicates charming temperaments! I'm a great believer in temperament. As I was saying to an admirer of Maudie's just now, 'Show me temperament and I'll show you a thoroughbred.' He agreed with me, as he is very emotional himself—in quite a nice way, of course! Such a handsome man, 'Guns' of the *Renown*. I must introduce him."

"We were the same term in the *Britannia*—he's a very good fellow," said Mr. Tresidder.

Mrs. Lancaster quickly recovered herself.

"You know each other already? How delightful that is! Popular people like yourselves positively know everybody who is anybody. Unfortunately my visiting list is sadly curtailed by my husband, who is so madly jealous that he won't allow me to look at a stranger. Quite a Stone Age man. He must have an account of every one I meet, flattering but most provoking. Henry actually was annoyed because Mr. Marrish of the Flagship was pay-

ing me great attention. Of course he is rather 'engineerish,' but, as I always say, nobody can accuse me of being a snob. Not that the engineers themselves can be exonerated from that failing. Their grievance at the difference in uniforms is too absurd. As if a curl could alter their status! If plain stripes are good enough for Henry's branch, I am sure they are good enough for the engineers. My husband says he wouldn't have a curl at any price —just giving money to the outfitters. The executives are welcome to additional gold lace so far as he is concerned, as they are the only officers in the Service without a real profession. The other branches have trades at their finger-ends, so to speak. What I say myself is: Are seamen necessary nowadays?" She looked intelligently at her host, but replied to the question herself. "I think the Salthorse has had his day, he belongs to the age of masts and yards. Doubtless he was very useful when there were ropes and things to pull on, but in these times of progress and steam the engineers are *the* people, say what you will. With the rakish Edward on the throne we shall see great changes!"

She looked into the future with eager speculation, and her face, to Mrs. Tresidder, bore the pleased expression worn by a Socialist witnessing a wholesale conflagration, or a street accident to a member of the aristocracy.

Mrs. Tresidder bore with equanimity her guest's disparaging remarks upon seamanship, being herself only interested in the Navy as an accessory of the Crown, but the adjective applied to the British monarch was more than she could countenance. Especially as the Royal reputation, suffering as it did from chronic debility, needed the tender nursing of loyal subjects to restore it to a semblance of moral prestige.

"I feel confident," she said icily, "that His Majesty will follow the precedents laid down by his Gracious Mother." A remark which showed her faith in constitutional reform and conservative principles.

Victoria, who was not interested in Naval regulations, thrones or ethics, drifted through the open door into the dimly lit hall from which the stone staircase slanted into the gloom of upper stories and expectant rooms. She mounted slowly and turned into the tessellated corridor, a shadowy vista scored with the black oblongs of open doors. On tip-toes she crept past, hoping to escape the vigilance of bogies lurking within.

As she climbed the next flight the moon shone down upon her through the skylight; bars of white light cut the darkness like a silver ladder leaning against the smooth plastered wall. She felt her way to Sheila's closed door and turned the knob. The room felt cold and withdrawn, as if communing with memories.

An iron bed stood nakedly in the centre of the floor, folded blankets were piled neatly on the mattress. Hanging from a hook in the ceiling was the ghostly outline of mosquito curtains, bundled out of the dust.

Victoria crossed to the dressing-table on which lay a pin-tray containing two boot-buttons, the stump of a pencil and some hairpins, an ebony brush lying on its back, and a sandalwood box with a broken lid. She pulled at the handle of a drawer which was partly open—something inside snapped and the drawer gave with a jerk. A ball of white wool rolled to the floor, followed by a half-finished tiny sock with the broken ends of a knitting needle sticking forlornly through the toe. Victoria supposed Sheila had been making dolls' boots in readiness for her birthday, due in the early part of February. The

kindness of the action touched her deeply, and some large tears rolled down her cheeks.

In stooping to pick the sock from the floor, her hand closed upon the wrinkled leather of Sheila's shoes, hidden in the dust beneath the table. She pulled them out, greeting them as homely friends amidst the chill atmosphere of desolation. Together with the unwound tangle of wool she carried them to the window. The shoes, which had once been brown, were stained to an indeterminate colour of ruin, and were covered with flecks of dried seaweed. The soles had separated from the uppers and each section curled in opposite ways. They smelt of salt, damp and decay. Victoria dropped them with a scream and scuttled from the room, past the skylight and down the stairs through the eerie light of the moon, past the dark doorways to the bend of the landing where the friendly gleam of the hall lamp weakly filtered. She crouched in the angle of the wall, a tiny shuddering figure with tear-stained bespectacled eyes buried in the folds of a grimy pinafore. She wept for the forlorn, broken shoes, for the knot in the laces betokening Sheila's untidy ways. She wept for the brush with the worn bristles which would never burnish the copper hair any more. She wept for the wasted womanhood and for her own youth.

VI

SHEILA'S successor was a conscientious spinster who had reached the negative age which is neither old nor young. She had passed the time of romance, if indeed she had ever known it, which was doubtful, as she came from a Northern industrial town where romance is put in its proper place and kept there. Her emotions were directed into the safe channels of mental arithmetic, the spelling of intricate words (pronounced with a Yorkshire accent which gave erroneous clues to identity in the dictionary), and Swedish drill, which she performed upon her back on the nursery floor, her thin uplifted legs encased in blue stockinet pantaloons describing wavering circles in the air.

Miss Judson's knowledge was not extensive, but what she did know she knew thoroughly, which is another Northern characteristic. Victoria's mind, an arid waste so far as education went, sopped up Miss Judson's erudition as a dry sponge soaks water. Before it had time to absorb all there was (which would not have taken long), a domestic cataclysm in the shape of Malta fever removed the hub of the Tresidder sphere, and broke the once cohesive household into active individual particles.

True to her loyal obsession, Mrs. Tresidder chose the day originally intended for the Coronation of King Edward to sever her connexion with this vale of tears. She drew her last breath in a whitewashed bare cell in the Retreat of the Blue Sisters, the nearest approach to a nursing home that the inhabitants of Malta were vouch-

safed. That she should depart into the unknown sped by the virgin representatives of a religion which she much disapproved was Fate's final and most subtle irony.

Upon the dominant hand being released, Lionel Tresidder felt an exultant reaction. Something deep within him sang a pæan for freedom, a lawless outbreak at variance with the generations of example designed to protect well-bred Englishmen from naming their cruder emotions. Not only did he acknowledge his feeling of relief, he labelled it boldly, and commenced to make plans for the future in which poetry, adventure, and celibacy formed a happy trinity. But it takes a purposeful man to turn his back upon his past, to build a new fire upon a foundation of ashes. He began to have misgivings as to his past actions; he wondered if he had treated his wife with the kindness, patience and sympathy which she deserved. Her personality was already dimming in his mind. He endowed her with soft, clinging ways and feminine weaknesses which had never been hers, and finally persuaded himself that he had been a brute in his married life. This opened up a maze of doubts, qualms and regrets which he wrestled with: losing a little of his newly found happiness with each tussle. Worn and jaded with constant mental strife, he looked about for a palliative, and found it in the Romish Church. He obtained great comfort from this faith, which gives hard and fast laws to its followers in place of the shaky beliefs and individual tenets which are allowed to flourish like weeds in other churches. He read the Lives of the Saints, went to confession regularly, ate green food on Fridays, was rewarded by the spiritual regeneration which is given to those who transfer their burdens on to the strong shoulders of the True Church, and felt a relief at the shifting

of responsibility similar to that which must be enjoyed by the delinquent who finds himself in the safe custody of the police.

Having found the only certain route to heaven, he was eager to share his discovery with others. To this end he took Miss Judson and Victoria to High Mass one Sunday. The experiment was a failure, as so many experiments are. Miss Judson was well satisfied with her own form of Christianity, being one of those fortunate people who accept without question the religion meted out to them with their christening mugs. She was a staunch, if tepid, supporter of the branch of the Church of England which is defined as Low, a symptom of which is a very active antagonism to the Roman Catholic Church. Although she took her own faith mildly, she followed its militant anti-Papal policy with gusto, and in speaking of this noxious religion, which she did in hostile tones, she was particular to designate it as Roman Catholicism. She found the prefix an exquisite irritant.

As was to be expected, Miss Judson went to High Mass in a warlike and unchristian frame of mind which was not improved by the clouds of incense which she was forced to breathe; by the vestments of which she disapproved; or by the massive statue of St. Peter, whose big toe, brightly polished by the lips of supplicants, struck her as being both idolatrous and insanitary. To mark her condemnation, she punctuated the Mass with aggressive coughs, which intimated to the Papists in her vicinity that she was in imminent danger of suffocation.

Victoria's attitude was hardly better. She evinced an impious curiosity, the demeanour of a spectator watching a pageant rather than a participant in a religious ceremony.

It was a disappointing experience for her father, and one which he did not repeat.

§

When Lionel Tresidder felt himself firmly established in his new faith, he turned to the secular matters thrust into the background during his soul's transition.

It quite surprised him to discover how very much he disliked his present mode of life. He found himself looking with alert disparagement upon the ungraceful lines of his command, a port destroyer of an almost obsolete type, which he took out for target practice every Tuesday, an uninspiring routine for an ambitious lieutenant desiring promotion.

Dominated by his resurrected hopes, he applied for and obtained the command of a gunboat up the Yang-tse-kiang, an appointment offering alluring possibilities to the adventurous.

Simultaneously he settled the course of Victoria's life by gratefully accepting his family's offer to take her to live with them at their house outside Weymouth. Lionel Tresidder reflected that lonely men are incapable of bringing up little girls; matrimony and fatherhood had failed to erase the impression of mystery surrounding women. He felt no confidence in his ability to manage his daughter, and the possibility of contending with the problem, unaided by Miss Judson (whom he regarded in an almost sexless light), hastened his plans for departure. Love for Victoria intensified his trepidation, fear of blundering and shattering the affinity existing between them became a dread. Things might be simplified later. As his knowledge grew so might his shyness decrease, and a way be found to surmount this barrier of sex which

seemed to insulate her soul from his. Together they might discover some enchanted island and exist on its magical properties without the disgusting necessity of eating.

He gave a distasteful push to the plate of stewed meat and pale gravy before him.

Miss Judson interpreted the action wrongly.

"It's wholesome New Zealand mutton—I saw the label. Last year I was conducted over the cold storage depôt in Hull by the foreman who had been on an up-country 'station'—a colloquial term for a farm. The Canadian equivalent is 'ranch.' He said the abattoirs in New Zealand surpassed those in the home country in size and cleanliness."

"Indeed!" Lionel Tresidder responded feebly. He wished he could repel the snacks of information served at meals by Miss Judson, unpalatable rivals to the joints they verbally garnished.

Assured of her superior intelligence, she disdained the light conversation with which lesser women enliven the monotony of chewing. She added grammar to breakfast, a seasoning of philosophy to dinner, and sprinkled dates and facts with such a lavish hand that everything eaten savoured of education.

She announced with brisk efficiency, "I must commence packing this afternoon—I believe in small boxes or bundles, numbered and listed."

"I prefer one trunk—one large trunk," Mr. Tresidder said firmly.

She humoured him. "Do you? My aunt, who is an experienced traveller—she has been three times to Palestine and once to Syria—recommends small packages,

numbered and listed. I found it worked admirably coming out here."

"Perhaps you're right." He decided to abandon his attempts to assert himself.

"I think you have two sisters and a stepmother, in addition to your father who is a Vice-Admiral?" said Miss Judson, verifying her facts.

"Quite!"

"Then there will be no young companions for Victoria?"

"Not exactly children. My younger sister is about twenty-three, and Sophy can't be more than thirty-four. My stepmother is a year or so older."

"An old man's darling," Miss Judson interjected in a sprightly manner.

A vision of Miriam Montague-Curzon as he first saw her flashed across Lionel Tresidder's mind. A voluptuously handsome Jewess, festooned with diamonds and laced into a scarlet satin gown. Of her father, oily, suave and protuberant in a check suit, who subsequently gained fame and a knighthood by sending to the troops in South Africa tins of liquorice lozenges embossed with the Queen's head.

"Perhaps your stepmother will interest herself in Victoria, as she has no children of her own?"

"Most unlikely—Sophy will bring up the child. She's very conscientious."

"I have a theory that spinsters are better at juvenile management than matrons. Their freedom from conflicting interests ensures the unbiased judgment which is so essential in dealing with undeveloped mentalities."

"I hope you're right," said Lionel Tresidder dubiously.

"Unquestionably." Miss Judson quelled him with a look.

§

The rising sun cast a magic spell over the Grand Harbour. Soft mother-o'-pearl lights chased pallid dawn from the sky; the sweep of grey water changed into a rosy flood and then to a sheet of beaten gold. On the ledges of precipitous yellow rock hemming the seaboard stood square-fronted houses, flatly defined like cardboard patterns with no substance behind them. Twin pillared belfries and brightly painted cupolas thrust assertive shoulders out of the cubic monotony. Far away in the purple distances lay terraces of minute fields diversely coloured as a patchwork quilt.

It was an early morning in October, and rather cold. Victoria stood shivering between her father and Miss Judson on the dirty deck of the *Carola* bound for Naples. The ship sat squatly on the water, and to Victoria's fancy resembled the most objectionable type of cockroach, the kind that have wide, spread backs and are of a colour not quite black nor wholly brown.

Alongside the rickety gangway lay the whaler waiting to take Lieutenant Tresidder back to his ship. The imminence of parting hung like a dark cloud over Victoria and her father. Seconds jogged by in embarrassed pauses and staccato sentences; a discordant prelude to the last moment upon which their minds were fixed.

The *Carola* was dirty and smelled of the combined odours of the last two cargoes, cattle and kerosene. Victoria was feeling sick already, and feared the alterna-

tive of public disgrace or private misery, intensified by the dark, stuffy cabin.

She gazed with despair at the lines of battleships resplendent in coats of black and buff paint, with working parties upon their decks, seamen who would gleefully witness her degradation. Looking at the floating monsters, she repeated their names and fighting capacities to herself in an undertone, hoping to keep her qualms in subjection by these mental gymnastics: "H.M.S. *Cæsar*, *Illustrious* and *Victorious*, of the *Majestic* class, armament, four twelve-inch guns; twelve six-inch; sixteen twelve-pounders; twelve three-pounders; two Maxims and four torpedo tubes. H.M.S. *Canopus*, four twelve-inch; twelve six-inch; twelve twelve-pounders; six three-pounders; two Maxims; four torpedo tubes."

"Say the Kings of England, Vic." Miss Judson saw in her pupil's repetition of armaments an unhoped-for sign of grace.

"William the First, 1066; William the Second, 1087," mumbled Victoria. It was becoming immaterial to her what unintelligible list she recited.

"Victoria is turning green," her father observed. Having drawn the attention of the governess to the fact, he detached himself from his immediate surroundings to watch a young officer's unseamanlike handling of a fouled anchor.

"Are you feeling ill?" Miss Judson put this futile question, watching in the helpless manner of spinsters the child's changing colour.

"Yes," said Victoria, and lost no time in proving her assertion.

"I'm sorry you feel like that!" Miss Judson was

fundamentally kind under her crust of learning. She would have helped Victoria had she known how; it was not her fault that her curriculum held no formula for the comfort of motherless, sick little girls.

"There's one consolation, nothing can make the deck much worse than it was before."

"They've all seen me!" wailed Victoria.

"Who?" demanded Miss Judson.

"The sailors!"

"Oh, those!" Miss Judson's tone consigned them to the limbo where such insignificants belonged.

Victoria's final parting with her father was perfunctory. Waves of nausea diminished the importance of farewell. She watched him disappear down the gangway with relief. No longer would physical preoccupation be interrupted by emotional demands which had ceased to have significance.

The motley crew of the *Carola* were getting up the anchor; opportunely so far as Victoria's pride was concerned. Another catastrophe was inevitable—Lord Charles Beresford himself might be a disgusted witness. She was glad when the ship steamed slowly past Fort St. Angelo, away from the gallant Naval men who would never of course, being sailors, experience the distressing internal quakings she endured.

They passed into the open sea, leaving a pale satin stripe behind them upon the turquoise water. Soon the island lost its rocky outline and became a patch of low misty hills upon the horizon and then a vague smudge in the universal blue.

BOOK TWO

I

STUPEFIED with fatigue, Victoria reached her new home. The drive from the station in a slow-moving carriage was the climax to a long series of uncomfortable adventures. Miss Judson, to whom she had become attached from habit rather than choice, abandoned her charge at Weymouth station, handing her over to Miss Tresidder with the same lack of formality as if transferring a parcel for which she had been temporarily responsible. The life in Malta, the experiences of the last week, seemed blotted out by a hurried and perfunctory parting kiss. Reality, in the shape of numerous small knobby packages, claimed Victoria's attention. Her travelling rug, intimately folded within Miss Judson's, had to be brutally detached, plates and cups shared across the Continent were separated and piled into two lonely lots on the grimy surface of a luggage trolly.

Miss Tresidder stood aside, holding Victoria by the hand. Her face wore the resigned expression peculiar to well-bred features when witnessing the arrival or departure of trains.

"You'll find it cold after Malta," she observed with polite detachment.

"Not so cold here as in Ooddersfield," said Miss Judson as she scraped amongst the packages. "I'm used to cold, dry cold, such as we have in Yorkshire. This seems damp cold—I've always heard that the south country was damp."

"Quite!" rejoined Miss Tresidder.

The train which would ultimately take Miss Judson to Leeds gave an unexpected blast on its whistle. Possessions littering the platform were quickly gathered together and cast into a third-class compartment. A flickering wave of a handkerchief, showing by its colour the tribulations through which it had passed, a fleeting impression of familiar features, and Miss Judson had gone for ever.

Victoria stood gazing forlornly after the rear light of the train, conscious of pattering rain and a howling wind which made the gas-jets above her head flicker and almost go out. Aunt Sophy, with the help of a porter, was collecting the scattered luggage and stowing it within a dilapidated cab drawn up beside the platform. The trunk of unwieldy dimensions was hoisted to the box-seat and securely strapped. The cabman took his place. Aunt Sophy and Victoria gingerly inserted themselves amongst the smaller packages, and the drive commenced.

As they came out of the station yard the wind met them with a swoop and rush from the black void at the end of the street, bringing with it the thunder of waves and the sound of rolling pebbles. They turned aside, taking the road behind a tall line of lodging-houses.

Lamp-posts at far intervals faintly illuminated the wet roadway, showing wooden gates puncturing a high brick wall, the faint outline of back windows, lighted sculleries, drain pipes and chimneys.

Victoria huddled wearily against the American-cloth upholstery. The point of a tin box was drilling a painful hole into the calf of her bare leg, a trickle of water from a join in the carriage roof pattered upon the crown of her hat. But these discomforts were as nothing compared with the waves of shyness and homesickness which swept

her. Miss Judson had been a slender link connecting Victoria with her mother, her father, Josepha, Mrs. Lancaster and Maudie, and the familiar rooms in the villa on the Via Marina. Parting had severed more than the tepid regard existing between them; it had broken with a desolating snap the chain joining her to intimate safe things.

She turned to Miss Tresidder, who sat in amiable silence beside her. "Did you ever meet Josepha?" she inquired optimistically.

"No, dear—what an odd name!" Although Miss Tresidder intended her response to be sympathetic, it dashed Victoria's hopes that in some mysterious grown-up way her aunt had knowledge of the household in Sliema.

"You'll be glad of your supper, it'll be half-past nine before we get home. What time do you generally go to bed?" Miss Tresidder spoke in friendly conversational tones, unconscious of her niece's misery.

"Seven, since Sheila went under the sea."

"My dear, I don't think I quite understand." Her voice conveyed shocked surprise.

Victoria explained unwillingly: "Sheila was my beautiful governess who went away one rainy afternoon and didn't come back. The demons of Casa Said sent her through the dungeons under the sea and drowned her."

"I remember hearing that she misconducted herself—quite dreadfully." Recollecting the youthfulness of her companion, Miss Tresidder shuddered. Fervently she hoped that Victoria was not going to be a difficult child. She had looked forward to forming her mind on the accepted lines as laid down by Mrs. Markham and other ladies who had placed their experience at the command

of less gifted, but equally zealous, educationists. Only that morning she had arranged upon a shelf in what was to be her niece's room the books that had beguiled or improved her own youthful mind—*Jessica's First Prayer*, *The Crown of Success*, *Her Benny* and *The Child's Guide to Knowledge*, and it now seemed probable that Victoria had already a defined personality with a mind developed upon weird and uncomfortable lines. Instead of being a solace, she might be but another complex individual to be introduced into a household already a theatre for jarring emotions. Miss Tresidder sighed. She would have like to be a member of a commonplace family, instead of which she had to cope, as best she might, with a handful of people determined to be neither happy nor ordinary. Her thoughts were here interrupted by the shriek of the wind, which caught the carriage as it emerged from behind the sheltering houses. The thunder of breakers and the tearing sound of rolling shingle mingled with the din of the storm. Waves lashed against the narrow sea wall beside them, sending up a white dancing spume against a background of scudding clouds. On the other side of the road Lodmoor Marsh stretched in a dark inky flood to the distant circle of hills. The wind, which howled with unabated fury over the sea, seemed to change its character as it crossed the road. Like a conspirator furtively whispering of sinister secrets, it crooned amongst the reeds; it rocked the stagnant water to life, so that it gurgled and chuckled to itself like an evil confederate. The wind whistled and groaned and turned and twisted, until it was lost in a faint scream between far-away valleys.

The dismal scene and the uncanny clamour of the storm put the final touch upon Victoria's despair. She be-

gan to cry. At first her tears fell softly: they trickled unobtrusively down her cheeks and were absorbed by the scarf around her neck. She looked out of the window, pretending to be interested in a landscape which she could not see. A sob escaped her, then another and another.

"Are you crying?" Miss Tresidder inquired with concern.

"No," Victoria hastily rejoined. No sooner had the denial escaped her than she was overcome with shame. She saw herself branded for ever as a story-teller, her deceit would go before her, she would be condemned in advance by her unknown relatives. She subsided in a miserable heap, her sobs fell over each other in noisy grief.

"You are crying, Victoria. I'm sorry you're miserable, but you shouldn't say you are not crying when you are. That's not the way to grow up a good girl and go to heaven." She put a thin arm round Victoria and drew her against her mackintoshed shoulder. The caress, though well intentioned, lacked spontaneity and imparted no comfort to Victoria's grief-stricken soul. It merely emphasized her loneliness and seemed by its lack of warmth to outline the gulf surrounding little girls who told lies.

"You must always tell the truth, then every one will love you."

"I didn't tell a story, I was only pretending, so you shouldn't guess I was crying."

"It's as wrong to act a falsehood as to tell a lie. Besides, people always discover the truth and then they won't trust you any more."

"Do you never make-believe that things are happening in the way you want them to happen?"

"Never!" said Miss Tresidder emphatically.

§

Victoria awoke next morning in a small white-enamelled bed decorated with four brass balls. The bed faced the window, through which she could see a series of chalk headlands capped with green, jutting one beyond the other until they lost themselves behind a silver haze which hung across the sea like a curtain.

She retained but a dim memory of the night before, of being undressed and put to bed. A few incidents stood out, but the connecting links were missing. The drive through the blustering storm telescoped with a supper of bread-and-milk eaten under the supervision of a round pink person named Polly Anker, whilst Aunt Sophy and a boyish old gentleman hovered anxiously in the background, unsubstantial and irrelevant, like people in a dream. Eventually they had all drifted away, leaving her blinking sleepily at a night-light and the shadows of four monstrous balls on thin stalks which danced a jig upon the ceiling.

The room looked quite different in the pale November sunlight. For one thing, there was a great deal more in it than she had suspected. It looked as if the contents of two or three rooms, and the possessions of several persons, had been packed with much thought and ingenuity into a space which would never have held them had less consideration been given to the stowage. A large cupboard, decorated haphazardly with coloured scraps, occupied the whole of the wall from the fireplace to the window Wedged sideways between it and the dressing-table was a dilapidated rocking-horse. A big tin bath with a lid stood in another corner and formed a platform for a

doll's-house and a collection of martyred dolls. A nursery fender towered above a small bedroom grate; a screen, a chest of drawers, a washing-stand and a book-shelf comprised the remainder of the important furniture. The walls were crowded with bright shiny pictures of ladies wearing "waterfall backs" to their skirts and fur boa-constrictors round their necks, indistinctly seen through snowstorms; others gowned in muslin and blue bows played at archery and croquet, representations of society in the 'eighties which were interlarded with examples of the childhood of that period. Little girls in Kate Greenaway bonnets and tight dresses sat demurely on hassocks, or, assisted by long-haired brothers, amateurishly negotiated slippery inclines. Hanging above the mantelpiece was a gratis presentation picture in sepia of "Dancing Days," painted by Victoria's mother, and given by the proprietors of Malaweki tea in exchange for coupons.

Victoria surveyed this novel room with interest. Hitherto circumstances had denied her the amenities of a real nursery, but she recognized it at once from descriptions supplied by her mother and father.

The door opened a little way and Polly Anker's cheerful face appeared through the gap.

"Awake already, lovey?"

"Yes," responded Victoria dutifully.

The door opened wide and disclosed the whole of the housemaid's ample person. A large white apron protected her pink print dress; a minute cap sustaining long muslin streamers perched on the top of her head, and from beneath this fly-away attachment her broad red face beamed benignly.

"I've undone your trunk and brought you a change of

things. Your Aunt Sophy says she wishes you to wear a plain frock, as she can't abide the check one you came in last night."

"Indeed!" said Victoria politely.

"She's all for mildewed shades, browns, greens, and drabs. Now, your grandmother, as you might call her, she being your grandfather's second wife, is gone on startling colours, reds and yellers and Reckitt's blue. Miss Verena favours lavender, pink and grey."

As she talked she washed Victoria's face and hands and hustled her into her clothes with the deftness which comes from practice. She then commenced to brush her hair.

"I was nurse to your daddy and aunties, though you mightn't credit it to look at me. I took over the nurseries when I'd just turned eighteen, and here I've been ever since. You don't favour your father—take after your poor Ma's side, I fancy. Your Auntie Verena is the good-looking one, she's such lovely curly hair. Well, I remember her saying to me on my first evening, 'Polly,' she says, 'my hair is only combed once a week.' She wanted to get out of it because it tangled up and hurt her, being so curly. Now, yours is as straight as a line, and must be put in rags at night."

"Thank you," said Victoria gratefully.

Polly, despite her avowed fondness for curls, plastered Victoria's front hair to her head with the aid of a wet brush. She then tied a few strands firmly with a narrow ribbon bow, a mode which imparted a startled expression. Victoria, long accustomed to be a victim for the display of a variety of grown-up tastes, apathetically regarded herself in the glass.

"You'll do," said Polly, giving her head a final swipe. "When you've had your breakfast, come back to look at

the toys belonging to your father and Aunt Sophy."

Victoria viewed the heap of dolls with aversion; their armless and legless condition was sufficient to proclaim a priority of ownership, without the look of allegiance and experience lurking behind their bland eyes. She felt that she did not wish to have anything to do with them.

She left the room and walked slowly downstairs into a pleasant square hall gaily papered with green parakeets. A fire blazed in an open hearth and faced the big front door and the two casement windows on either side. Admiral Tresidder's sword and Midshipman's dirk hung above the mantelpiece, with a brass boat-yoke, a sextant and a telescope to keep them company. The walls were ornamented with stuffed heads of deer, and by fish in glass cases. Spears, daggers and so-called poisoned arrows dangled horizontally from the picture-rail and hung vertically between a bewildering number of tall mahogany doors.

Victoria hesitated at the foot of the stairs. Hearing voices coming from a room beside her, she knocked diffidently upon the door, and receiving no reply, opened it and found her grandfather and her aunt breakfasting within.

Aunt Sophy greeted her affectionately. Sleep had obliterated her impressions of Victoria and restored the imaginary child with the ideal disposition.

"Kiss me good morning." She advanced her cheek obliquely. "Now kiss your grandfather."

Admiral Tresidder warmly accepted Victoria's peck, and the sensation of a damp beard against her lips outlasted the caress by several seconds.

"Did you enjoy the journey from Malta?" Sophy

asked in kindly tones as she handed Victoria a cup of very weak tea.

"No."

"When I was a little girl I was taught to say, 'Yes, thank you.'" Sophy spoke gently, and as if she were offering an abstract observation.

"Why should the child say what she doesn't mean?" Admiral Tresidder fixed his eyes disconcertingly upon his daughter. Her faded cheeks became pink.

"I'm sure she means 'Thank you,'" she said defensively.

Victoria thought for a moment. "The journey was horrid," she announced gravely. "I had a pain inside, and I was sick over the Italian next to me in the train. It was the steak at Naples. Miss Judson wished to be sick too, but had to put it off because foreigners won't have the carriage windows open."

Sophy looked distressed. "My dear, you must not give these intimate details, especially before your grandfather."

Victoria felt hurt, she had not wished to retail the mortifying incident. Grown-ups were incomprehensible, they all shared a habit of asking questions, and whilst upholding the merits of truth, were invariably shocked or dissatisfied with straightforward replies. She said no more and commenced a survey of the room. White enamelled panelling came to within a foot of the ceiling, and from a moulding at the top badly painted family portraits were suspended at intervals. A white marble mantelpiece supported a massive bronze clock and urns to match, above which, in a gilt frame, hung a copy of "Can 'oo Laugh?" painted by the artist from the original. In the opposite wall three French windows reached from

floor to ceiling. The centre window was slightly open, the two on either side were closed and veiled with handsome filet lace; all three had valances and side curtains of pale green brocade. The carpet also was green, likewise the seats of the Heppelwhite chairs ranged against the walls. Sophy Tresidder had the sideboard behind her and the door and the fireplace on her left. Admiral Tresidder, with his back to the light, faced Victoria, who could see through the uncurtained window the garden, a bend of the drive, and a row of black-chimneyed Coastguard cottages on the slope of the nearest cliff.

Sophy, having finished her breakfast of toast, took a mother-o'-pearl knife from her pocket and started to slit open her letters, afterwards pinning them together in a bunch. She cut the envelopes round their remaining edges and piled them in a heap, address side down, "For cook to write memos upon."

She wore a plain brown dress with a turned-down collar and tie. Her mouse-coloured hair was trained over a wire frame shaped like a Marie Stuart cap, and the ends were rolled into sausages on the top of her head. It was soft hair, and, had it been permitted, would have waved prettily. Her delicate pink-and-white skin was faintly crinkled, like an apple which has been kept too long. Her eyes were earnest and kindly, her sensitive mouth drooped a little at the corners.

Admiral Tresidder pushed his plate and empty cup to the unoccupied end of the table and spread *The Financial Times* in their place. With the alert, eager interest of a child he scanned the columns and compared prices with figures in a shiny notebook.

"Palembang Rails have risen two points," he announced.

"Have they, dear?" Aunt Sophy's response lacked enthusiasm.

"I'll wire Guttenberg to hold them a little longer." Again he bent his grey head over the page, his thoughts focused upon his latest investment. After a pause: "A lot of fellows lose their heads and sell too quickly, they lack the courage to hold on until the right moment. The possession of intuition and nerve is essential in the money market as in the Service. Palembang Rails are good things and are sure to treble themselves within the next few days. I intend to hold on until the psychological moment." Admiral Tresidder tossed the paper on the floor, and extracting a cigar from his case, cut the end off with marked complacency. He made an abortive attempt to light it and broke several matches. He said "Damn" under his breath, and hummed a tune. Victoria gathered that her grandfather was embarrassed, and was feigning an ease of mind which was wanting. She glanced across at Aunt Sophy, and was surprised to notice her tense attitude, like a cat waiting to pounce.

When she spoke her voice was sharp and antagonistic: "I hope there is no danger of the Palembang Rails descending with a crash as did the San Eugenio Oil Wells."

"No fear at all. That was a 'dud' concern got up to entrap the speculators—in fact it transpired that there were no wells. I'll soon recover what I lost on that transaction."

"What proofs have you that there are rails in Palembang?"

"I must take exception to your doubting attitude, Sophy. If there are indications that a concern is not fair and above-board, suspicions are justifiable; in this case they are unfounded. The names of the directors

are in themselves sufficient guarantee to satisfy the most timid investor."

"Humph!" Aunt Sophy retorted sceptically.

"How's Verena this morning?" Admiral Tresidder changed the subject briskly.

"Not so well. She complained of a headache, so decided not to get up."

"Poor girl! She's a sad invalid, just like Miriam."

"Not in any way." Aunt Sophy was again aggressive. "Your wife suffers from nerves."

"Miriam says Verena's complaint is hysteria." He proffered the suggestion good-humouredly.

"Your wife may know a number of things which I do not—I never claim to be clever—but a knowledge of Verena's nature is not amongst them."

"I expect she's right. She has experience, and is remarkably shrewd."

"Verena never shows her true self to any one who is not sympathetic."

"Of course I can't answer for that, but Miriam's clever and little escapes her."

"What is hysteria?" Victoria timidly inquired.

"You wouldn't understand if I explained, dear," said Aunt Sophy.

"I could try."

"Hysteria is a complaint more mental than physical, and means that your poor Aunt Verena fancies she is ill when she is really quite well." Admiral Tresidder felt pleased with this definition. He pushed his chair back with a clatter and walked to the window, indicating that the subject had been satisfactorily dealt with.

"And are nerves real?" Victoria tactlessly persisted.

"No, just imagination!" Aunt Sophy answered crossly.

"Merely a figure of speech," Admiral Tresidder remarked airily.

"When a person complains of ailments which do not exist, that person is suffering from nerves." Aunt Sophy's voice was decisive but uneven. She collected her letters and their envelopes with trembling fingers, and then extended her hand to Victoria.

"If you're a very quiet little girl, you may come upstairs to see your Aunt Verena, and Mrs. Tresidder."

"My mummy was Mrs. Tresidder," Victoria said in a puzzled voice.

"My mother also was Mrs. Tresidder, but the lady you're going to visit is your stepgrandmother."

"My dear Sophy!" the Admiral remonstrated.

"And what else is she, pray? The child must have the relationships explained. It's strange enough for her as it is, poor little mite."

Absent-mindedly she returned to her place at the table and sat down, and Victoria, concluding that the introduction to her new relatives was postponed, scrambled back on to her chair. She discovered that her aunt was regarding her voluminous black frock with dismay, and looked down in confusion, being extremely conscious of her unique costume. She waited uncomfortably for the criticism bound to follow.

"Just look at the child's dress!"

"What's amiss with it? The frock appears to be warm and made of good material."

"How like a man to think only of utility! I suppose that was Lionel's view when he dressed her like Mrs. Kruger."

The Admiral shrugged his shoulders. "Doubtless he did the best he could in the unhappy circumstances."

"Perhaps his new religious teachers chose the garment. The cloth smells of the inferior dye inextricably associated with nuns."

"That's not the way to speak of Lionel before his child."

"I have said nothing against him in any way." Aunt Sophy sounded aggrieved.

"I know you don't mean anything—it's your way of showing concern for Victoria, but it's upsetting." As he spoke he opened the window and stepped out on to the gravel drive. He stood for a moment looking up at the sky, a short sturdy figure in a blue reefer suit, silhouetted against dripping shrubs. Presently he began to pace briskly up and down, turning smartly when he had reached the limits of an imaginary quarter-deck.

II

VICTORIA, with her hand clasped in Aunt Sophy's, climbed the stairs to visit her new relations. The prospect was disturbing. In addition to being strangers the two ladies were suffering from obscure maladies. Headaches, bilious attacks, and influenza colds were familiar ailments demanding sympathy which Victoria was ready to give, but illnesses other than these had the sinister aspect of mystery. Deformed persons such as she was accustomed to see begging alms on the Marsamuscetto steps, or those exposing obscene growths to the passers-by, had filled her with panic and left a smudge upon her mind. That it was possible for the resolute to pass such sights unmoved in no way mitigated her own suffering. That the complaints of Mrs. Tresidder and Aunt Verena had been lightly spoken of did little to diminish her trepidation. Had she not heard the suffering plaints of diseased mendicants dismissed by the healthy with a like disdain? The best she could do was to hide the fear which oppressed her. This determination was uppermost as she reluctantly kept pace with her aunt.

"Hurry along, slow-coach!" said Miss Tresidder playfully.

To Victoria's relief they paused on the landing to look through the window. Miss Tresidder ran her finger along the ledge and dislodged a light powdering of dust.

"Slattern!" she remarked cryptically.

Tarbubbles was built half-way up the first of the hills

undulating from the coast to Dorchester. The windows looked across the silver floods of Lodmoor and the sweep of Weymouth Bay to where Portland rose out of the sea like a giant boulder. The rock might have been torn from some distant mountain and cast into the pretty scene. Its grey riven sides, devoid of trees or shrubs, dominated the bay and like a gaunt interloper seemed to deride the crumbling cliffs of chalk sweeping in bold decay towards Lulworth Cove.

From Portland to the bluff headland that concealed the scolloped coastline to the east lay a line of destroyers firing at invisible targets. Puffs of smoke followed by loud reminiscent thuds proclaimed the nature of their activities to Victoria.

"Target practice," said Aunt Sophy.

"I know."

Victoria's tone was abrupt and seemed to fend off instruction. Miss Tresidder reflected that she had never been guilty of firmness at Victoria's age. Her mind had been politely receptive, accepting every proffered fact and never rejecting information because it was already familiar. In proof of this she remembered commencing afresh an English Grammar six separate times with six successive governesses—a true test of breeding.

"Gentlewomen are careful to appear ignorant of any matter which is explained to them. You should have said, 'Thank you, Aunt Sophy,' and made some intelligent inquiry bearing upon the subject."

"Why?"

Miss Tresidder had not expected her reproof to be questioned, and found herself unable to give reasons for maintaining polite hypocrisy. She was saved from unaccustomed analysis by the opening of a door on the

landing above and the sound of light steps crossing to the stairs. She turned with eager animation that was solicitous and kind.

"Is your head better, Rena? And do you think it wise to be up?" Fussily she ran up the remaining stairs, dragging Victoria with her.

"Better, but not quite gone. It's nagging, like a pin that nearly pricks, but doesn't quite do it. I thought a short walk might send the pain away, or perhaps I'd be wiser to rest in the hollow below the Coast guards. Which would be best, Sophy?" Verena earnestly appealed.

Victoria was much relieved to see no outward sign of mysterious illness. Apart from a certain fragility and a markedly irresolute manner, this new aunt seemed healthy and normal. She was younger than her sister and her face wore an almost childlike expression, due partly to wide grey eyes which had a blank look in them, and to a prettily shaped mouth always a trifle open, showing small even teeth. She looked timid and forlorn, like an attractive little girl who has lost herself. Victoria, ever swayed by beauty, found her apprehensions dissolving. She felt drawn to her younger aunt in a way she never would be to the homely, conscientious Aunt Sophy.

"How would you like to drive to town with Miriam? You'd get the benefit of the air without exertion. She's lunching again at the Yacht Club with Captain Vosper of the *Swiftsure*. It's surprising that father allows it, but as he does, you might as well get the drive. You could either return here for luncheon, or have it at 'The Gloucester.' It's quite correct for you to go there alone, in the 'off' season."

"The hotel is so dreary—everything shrouded in holland bags, and they only provide cold beef and pickles in

the winter. Besides, I hate going by myself; I feel so conspicuous."

"It's a change you need. Even looking at the bay from a different angle alters one's train of thought."

"It doesn't, it just reminds me that but for Miriam's interference I might be giving a luncheon of my own to a crowd of worth-while people."

"You will yet, dear," said Aunt Sophy consolingly.

Victoria, leaning unnoticed against the banisters, continued admiringly to scrutinize. Aunt Verena wore a grey dress of soft woollen material, its long trailing skirt trimmed at the bottom with frills. The ends of the lace scarf tightly wound about her neck were crossed and secured by a jewelled brooch, alleviating the plainness of the bodice. Her tiny hands, loaded with glittering rings, were constantly fluttering about her head in pursuit of wayward strands which she tucked helplessly into the tangle. She allowed her hair unrestrained liberty, unlike Aunt Sophy, who disciplined hers with a net.

A movement on the part of Victoria attracted Miss Tresidder's attention. She drew her forward with an apologetic gesture.

"This is our little niece," she announced.

Verena regarded Victoria coldly. "I heard you come last night. Your box crashed against my door and woke me."

Victoria blinked feebly. She felt as if she had received an unexpected and undeserved blow. Her dismay was conveyed to Miss Tresidder, who hurriedly endeavoured to gloss over her sister's lack of cordiality.

"We had a horrid drive along the flat mile. At any moment I thought the sea would dash over the wall and join the marsh."

Verena ignored the interruption. "I couldn't get to sleep for hours after. Then my head got bad, and I took those capsules the doctor gave me, which seemed to make it worse. I hope you are not going to make a noise in the house—I can't stand turmoil when my head aches."

"Of course she will be a thoughtful, quiet little girl," Aunt Sophy promised before reverting to the more urgent topic. "We will settle our plans by deciding that you drive with Miriam. We can arrange it now, she must be out of bed."

They crossed the landing to a door opposite the stairs. Aunt Sophy knocked upon it.

"Come in!" answered a loud, irritated voice.

The open door disclosed a large bedroom handsomely furnished in grey satinwood. Expensive dresses and soiled undergarments were heaped upon chairs and overflowed to the floor. The Admiral's striped pyjamas and a lace nightdress lay in intimate confusion upon the disordered bed; coffee from an overturned cup soaked into an embroidered pillow.

Mrs. Tresidder, dark, handsome and bold, was accentuating the blackness of her lashes before the mirror. She was inadequately clothed in an orange silk-frilled petticoat, a pair of black corsets and a sleeveless chemise. Neither the petticoat nor the chemise was fastened, and the stays were unlaced, thus allowing ample proportions to assert themselves in a quite embarrassing manner. Both Aunt Sophy and Aunt Verena blushed and appeared anxious to retire.

"For God's sake come in and shut the door. You're both so nice, one would think you never saw yourselves naked!"

"Really—not at all!" Aunt Sophy fluttered helplessly. "We came to suggest that Verena should accompany you to town. Will you tell us when you intend starting?"

"Twelve sharp. I should have thought such a well-bred young lady would hesitate before venturing alone into the dangers of our two moth-eaten streets. The carriage doesn't return until three, and in any case there won't be room. I'm bringing Captain Vosper, the Dallas boy and another man home to tea."

Mrs. Tresidder addressed herself to Sophy, pointedly ignoring Verena. After gazing at herself critically in the glass she gave a tweak to her sinuous hair, and finally added two curls which she extracted from a cardboard box on the dressing-table. The mirror reflected a striking woman with brown eyes, a pronounced Jewish nose and quantities of artificial-looking black hair. Her mouth was large and full-lipped, but her most noticeable features were thick arched eyebrows which nearly met.

Verena, who had been standing in the background nervously twisting her handkerchief through her fingers, stepped forward and stood tensely by the dressing-table.

"Did I hear you say Colin was coming to tea?" she demanded urgently.

"You did." The tone was patronizing and had a sneer in it. Mrs. Tresidder did not trouble to look at Verena, but put the final touches to her complexion with a lack of self-consciousness galling to the watching girl.

"Is he having lunch with you?"

"That's my business."

"He is—I can see it in your face. But understand, I'm coming too. I shall not allow you to scheme another man from me. I'm wise now, I know what you are.

Colin has always been my friend, ever since he was a little boy."

"He's a little boy still," said Mrs. Tresidder equably.

"He is certainly very young compared with you." Verena was shrilly rude. In her uncontrolled anger she was like a child who kicks the shins of an adamant elder in the hope of reversing the balance of power.

Miss Tresidder, apprehensively watching her foolhardy tactics, looked for a diversion, and found it in Victoria.

"This is Lionel's daughter," she breathlessly murmured as she pushed her forward.

"A funny little thing," Mrs. Tresidder commented, eyeing the preposterous bombazine dress.

Miss Tresidder, following her glance, aggressively repeated the Admiral's defence:

"It was the best Lionel could do in the unhappy circumstances."

"I dare say—men are generally inept."

"I refer, of course, to her dress," Miss Tresidder explained with dignity.

"Trust an old maid to suspect a *double-entendre!*"

"I did nothing of the kind."

"Your remark sounded as if you did!"

"Your mind is horrible, Miriam, like a French novel. And in any case I don't know what you imply."

"Of course not, dear, you wouldn't!"

Slow to abandon an idea, Verena, who had been impatiently waiting for a pause, broke in with hysterical bravado: "I shall appeal to father if you attempt to stop me lunching at the Yacht Club."

"I shan't prevent you making a fool of yourself!"

"I'm not a fool. I'm only doing what I can to defeat your cruel underhand tactics." Suddenly her defiance

seemed to crumple up, she shook all over and broke into sobs which rent the silence of the room raucously and horribly, like a person being violently sick. Mrs. Tresidder, after a cold glance, started to lace her corsets as if she had undisturbed possession of her bedroom. Victoria stood spellbound by the bedside, appalled by the noise and the invisible clashing of temperaments which seemed to disturb the atmosphere like waves of hot, fetid air. Her aunt's convulsed face, the horrid meaningless cries and wildly plucking hands, stabbed an ugly picture upon her mind. Although hating what she saw, she was compelled by Verena's strange magnetism to be sorry and almost lacerated by her frenzy.

Miss Tresidder put her arm round the shaking shoulders. "Don't fret so much—nobody thinks you foolish, and we all know how attractive you are. You're not well, that's what's the matter. Come and lie down; when you're better we'll have a nice little lunch together —a chicken and a trifle." She sounded as if she were promising a bag of sweets to a crying child.

"I shall go to the Club to meet Colin—I love Colin."

"Nonsense, dear. You said only last week he was selfish and grasping."

"I don't think so now—I want him."

With a dexterous twist she extricated herself from the encircling arm, and rushed from the room.

§

Every one seemed to take it for granted that Tarbubbles would at once absorb Victoria into itself as naturally and easily as a sparrow absorbs the misfortune of a swallowed worm. Her relations, intent upon their own difficulties and conflicts, were unable to visualize any others.

Their lack of interest chilled her and made her feel like the solitary representative of an obliterated household enjoying the hospitality of a charitable community.

After wandering aimlessly through a number of handsomely furnished rooms, as tidy and well polished as model apartments in an upholsterer's windows, Victoria caught sight of her grandfather delving in the garden. She went out through the dining-room window and discovered that he was removing dandelions from the lawn with an ingeniously bent knife. The grass was pitted with holes and strewn with weeds which he made no effort to collect.

"Have you seen your grandmother?"

"Yes. Doing her hair."

"She has beautiful hair." The Admiral prodded diligently at a root.

"It's wavy," said Victoria politely.

"She can sit on it," he confided proudly.

"How lovely!"

They lapsed into friendly silence. Victoria found her grandfather more sympathetic and less preoccupied with intangible problems than her other relations.

"Your Aunt Verena has been a little upset this morning. She came to me. I wish they didn't expect me to arbitrate—it only leads to further trouble. I suggested a hobby, stamp-collecting or seaweed. My mother used to make beautiful pictures out of samphire and dulse gummed to album leaves. Verena semed irritated by the proposal."

"Mother had a box of shells," said Victoria, who did not wish her grandfather to think she shared her aunt's superior ideas. She was not surprised to be taken into his confidence. She always found her elders eager to unburden their thoughts, taking it for granted that she

would be as interested in them as they were themselves. Quite unconsciously they regarded her mind as an empty receptacle for complex fragments which upset their own mental digestions.

"Your mother was a very remarkable woman. I hope some of her talent has descended to you. She would have made a great name had she lived. The late Queen, with her usual acumen, discovered your mother's genius in its infancy, and her patronage did much to promote the success which came to her so early in life." The Admiral, who enjoyed the sound of his own voice, made these laudatory statements in his best speech-making manner, rather overwhelming Victoria, who was unused to oratory.

"My children have never shown artistic aptitude, save your father who wrote verse. I regarded it as a regrettable accomplishment in his case. Commanding officers are apt to look askance at junior Watchkeepers who compose sonnets to the moon. Fortunately he seems to have got through without the disability making much difference to his career, but it is probably accountable for his predilection for the Church of Rome."

Victoria, knowing her limitations, refrained from making a reply which might by its inadequacy discourage her grandfather from reposing further confidences. Admiral Tresidder, who observed no shortcomings in his listener, adroitly decapitated a dandelion as if nipping off a Papal head.

"Personally I don't care for popery or poetry. Both encourage the imagination and that is against the interests of the Service."

"I think so," said Victoria agreeably.

"The artistic temperament is as great an impediment

to an officer as a squint or a game leg. My wife is lunching today with a youngster who is afflicted musically. Instead of applying himself to his duties, he learns preludes by Bach and sonatas by Beethoven. At his age Inman's Nautical Tables were sufficient for me."

"Colin?" inquired Victoria.

"Yes, Colin Dallas, the son of one of the ablest officers I ever served with. He married an Italian woman who sang in opera, and called it romance! They've both been dead these many years. Colin should take his career more seriously. His father's legacy will barely last until he's promoted lieutenant."

A crunching on the gravel made Victoria turn round. A neat brougham drawn by a brown mare was turning out of the stable yard, a very different affair from the hired cab which had brought her the night before. The Admiral straightened himself and they both watched the front door. Aunt Sophy and Aunt Verena came out of the house and stood at the top of the steps; a pink shadow in the background suggested Polly Anker hovering anxiously with a duster.

"Aren't you coming to see me off?" Verena called playfully. She stood self-consciously, her trailing skirts spread out behind her like the tail of a peacock. A little jacket was tightly buttoned across her immature breast and a mauve toque was slantingly poised on the top of her head by the aid of many pins. She looked ridiculously young, like a sorrowful child who had borrowed her mother's clothes.

"Will you be warm enough?" Miss Tresidder inquired solicitously.

"Quite, thank you, dear," Verena answered vaguely.

"You should have worn a boa."

"That would crumple my jabot."

"Better that than pneumonia," said the Admiral testily.

"No, daddy dear. Nobody of importance would watch me having pneumonia, but Colin would notice my crumpled lace. I must please Colin," she added softly.

"Rubbish!"

"Don't upset her, father," Miss Tresidder whispered urgently.

An uneasy silence gripped them. Victoria and her grandfather watched the mare standing patiently in the shafts of the brougham, Sophy furtively eyed Verena. All three were aware of each other and conscious of a shared apprehension.

"Miriam talks of buying a motor-car," said the Admiral conversationally.

"Noisy smelly things!" said Verena with a pout. "I saw a number when I was in Bath, mostly being towed by farm horses—the owners looked perfectly idiotic. When the contrivances did go they gave off clouds of evil smoke and noises like threshing-machines."

She spoke with bright absent-mindedness, her eyes, still red with weeping, fixed upon a fanciful roseate horizon.

"Cars are still in their infancy—in time motor traction will supersede the horse."

"You do have queer notions!" Miss Tresidder was indulgent.

The sound of Mrs. Tresidder's approaching steps was hushed by the opulent rustle of silk petticoats and the tinkling of chained ornaments. Eastern perfume emanated from her clothes like the odours arising from some erotic hothouse and overpowered the ladylike scent of

lavender which accompanied the two sisters. She flaunted her mature beauty with an arrogant assurance that reduced Verena's pale prettiness to nothing.

"The carriage has been waiting ten minutes," Admiral Tresidder mildly observed.

"And what of it?"

"It's inconsiderate."

"To whom?"

"Verena."

"I don't care if she has been waiting since midnight!"

"You should think of others, Miriam."

"Lord! And what consideration do I get from your daughters that I should concern myself about them?"

"Women should pull together."

"Nonsense! We all hate each other, which is only natural."

She swept her skirts scornfully about her and walked proudly down the steps to the waiting carriage. Hesitatingly Verena followed.

III

THE drawing-room at Tarbubbles had the pretentious air of comfort peculiar to Victorian and Edwardian homes. Dumpy and armless brocade chairs sat squatly on a pink Brussels carpet of floral design; octagonal tables supported silver-framed photographs and leather-bound books of engravings after Landseer and Birket Foster. There was a sofa with a curly back, and a draped grand piano of mysterious wood sustaining a palm in a Doulton pot, a Sèvres figure, a lamp with a frilled shade, a pile of fly-blown music and more photographs. White skin rugs were flung haphazardly upon the floor; massive Chinese vases stood between the windows; Eastern embroideries covered the walls; carved wooden utensils, grass fans and savage jewellery made of teeth and nuts lay on the shelves of cabinets. A beautiful commode and a set of Queen Anne chairs stood aloof, aristocrats amid a gathering of barbarians. In the grate a fire flamed and spluttered and generally made a great deal of itself without making much difference to the chilly atmosphere of the room charged with the concentrated odours of damp upholstery, ferns, and Eastern bric-à-brac.

Close to the fire was a Benares table laid for tea. Eight cups and saucers made a semicircle against the rim of the tray and in the centre a silver teapot, cream-jug and sugar-basin clustered about the spidery legs of a plated kettle, blowing and bubbling above the blue flame of a spirit lamp. On the shelves of a portable wicker stand of

doubtful stability were plates of bread-and-butter, scones, biscuits, and cake.

Aunt Sophy, resplendent in lace and accordion-pleated silk, sat expectantly behind the paraphernalia, a ceremonious position maintained since half-past four and it was now a quarter-past five. Each passing minute accentuated the look of suspense upon her face. Victoria having examined the souvenir views of Bettws-y-Coed and the current number of *The Flag after Pretoria*, thoughtfully provided for her entertainment, turned to her last distraction—a solitaire board and a bag of marbles. She found there were five marbles less than the number of holes in the board, so returned them to the bag.

"You're very restless!" Aunt Sophy remarked.

"No, I don't think so," said Victoria after reflection.

"I do think so," the rejoinder came with prim finality.

"I have sat on this chair for three-quarters of an hour."

"You must not argue."

"But it's true—we've both watched the clock."

Miss Tresidder was annoyed that her impatience had been noticed; her admonitory reproofs took on a note of acrimony.

"The well-bred observing the actions of others refrain from comment. It is especially unbecoming for a child to remark upon habits of her elders."

A sudden dash of rain against the windows deflected her attention from improving maxims to the brewing storm without. In the garden, trees and shrubs tussled with a rising wind, whilst uprooted dandelions whirled and twisted in a wild tarantella.

"Verena should have worn her boa. In this treacherous weather it is unwise to venture far without adequate wraps."

"Mrs. Tresidder had only a chiffon scarf."

"She'll come to no harm!" Miss Tresidder spoke with asperity."

"Isn't she lovely?"

"You mean your Aunt Verena?"

"Mrs. Tresidder is more lovely than she is," replied Victoria, who was neither a diplomat nor a grammarian.

"She may appeal to those who admire the Hebrew type," Aunt Sophy replied in a far-away voice.

The silence of the house was shattered by the sudden clanging of the front bell. Followed the quick opening and shutting of doors, the sound of Admiral Tresidder's ponderous steps and the clamour of excited voices.

"Peep into the hall and notice if Verena looks wet," Aunt Sophy whispered urgently.

Unlatching the door, Victoria obligingly applied her eye to the crack and obtained a vivid impression of a flushed and dishevelled houri playfully tugging at the obdurate coat of an inscrutable little Chinaman. Beside a distant table a lank man with a thin brown beard divvested himself of a torn scarf; his aloofness and Mrs. Tresidder's playfulness seemed over-emphasized. Admiral Tresidder looked on indulgently, like an elderly St. Bernard watching the gambols of frisky terriers. There was no sign of Verena. Gingerly closing the door, Victoria tip-toed back to her stool beside the fender.

"There's only Mrs. Tresidder and two men. One with a tight yellow face, the other brown and pulled out."

"Don't talk nonsense, Victoria. Faces are faces, some have good expressions and some have not—you might be describing pieces of india-rubber!"

The commotion in the hall drew nearer, the door handle was briskly turned and the door thrown wide

overthrew a screen and a gipsy table with a resounding clatter.

"Something's sure to fall in this room crammed with junk—there's not a yard to turn in. Don't trouble to pick them up, Joseph—it's no matter." Mrs. Tresidder, followed sheepishly by her two cavaliers, sailed across to a dumpy chair before the fire. "You can pour out tea, Sophy—Captain Vosper takes three lumps and Doctor Toon likes lemon. Lord, what a hell of a drive!" She threw back her head and stretched as unconcernedly as an animal, her lips curled back in a yawn which displayed white teeth and the red tunnel of her throat. Miss Tresidder surveyed her with distaste.

"What have you done with Verena?"

"Nothing; Dallas has her in tow somewhere. We last saw them looking for a cab behind Brunswick Terrace. It was raining and Verena had lapped her skirt round Colin's violin case—he looked furious, and no wonder!"

"Most thoughtful of Verena," said Miss Tresidder stiffly. "I'm astonished at your leaving her in the rain."

"Gracious, Sophy! We were already packed into the brougham like sardines in a tin. I sat on Doctor Toon's knee and nearly squashed him, although he's too polite to say so."

"He is unknown to me." With calm detachment Miss Tresidder filled five cups and left them standing in a steaming row upon the tray.

"My mistake! Staff-Surgeon Toon, bow prettily to Miss Tresidder." Miriam spoke with arrogant proprietorship.

His look of annoyance was quickly replaced by a blank expression. He bowed with deference to Miss Tresid-

der, who responded with a ladylike inclination of her head.

Doctor Toon's closely set features gave him a secretive look, which was intensified by black iris-less eyes set slantingly beneath flickering lids. His clean-shaved mouth was thin-lipped and tightly compressed over pointed teeth which he would show suddenly in a wide, unmirthful grin. Black hair fitted his skull like a cap; tightly stretched ivory skin covered his bland inscrutable countenance. He was short, lightly built, and carried himself with a sprightly assurance that was almost cocky.

Captain Vosper, lolling in a corner of the sofa close to Victoria, was the exact opposite of the jaunty little doctor. His tall angular body was loosely fastened together, as if his joints were made of worn elastic. Freckles almost matching the colour of his ragged beard and hair peppered his skin. His pale blue eyes were vacant and dreamy; his nose, slightly flattened at the bridge, had long hairs growing down the nostrils. He resembled an unkempt Irish poet rather than a post-captain.

"Where's your grandfather hidden himself?" Mrs. Tresidder suddenly demanded of Victoria, who was so startled by the unexpected notice that her tea went down the wrong way. She coughed and struggled for breath, feeling her face getting redder and redder, conscious that all eyes were fixed upon her in polite dismay.

"What aborigines children are!" Mrs. Tresidder wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"How unsympathetic! Any one might choke," Sophy answered defensively.

"Thump her on the back," Doctor Toon said to Captain Vosper, who was nearest. The loose leaden

hand was applied with zest and augmented Victoria's anguish.

"I believe she's going to be sick," Mrs. Tresidder observed gloatingly.

"Not in the drawing-room, Miriam!" Sophy firmly vetoed the suggestion.

"What's all the commotion?" demanded Admiral Tresidder as he entered.

"A little *contretemps*," answered Sophy resignedly indicating Victoria.

"You should give her air. I remember taking you as a little girl to a *tamasha* on board the Royal Yacht and you spurted your tea all over the skipper. The First-Lieutenant took you on deck and you were——"

"That will do, father!" Sophy coldly checked the embarrassing reminiscence.

Finding the general interest deflected from herself, Victoria began to recover. Furtively she wiped her eyes. "That's right," said her grandfather encouragingly, "come with me and we'll have our tea together on this little table."

She subsided gratefully into a dark corner beside the piano, where she endured all the agonies of humiliation which is the special torment of the over-sensitive.

Her grandfather gave her hand a comforting squeeze. "Don't cry, Vicky—such mishaps aren't of importance."

"They are—they're awful!" Too miserable to eat, too shy to go away, she sat with her head bent, her long yellow hair hanging over her face in a thick untidy curtain.

"Verena must be wet through, and it's almost dark!" Sophy's voice rose in querulous anxiety.

"Dallas will look after her," Admiral Tresidder answered with middle-aged tranquillity.

"She'll be all right so long as she carries the violin!"

Doctor Toon spoke with quick precision. His words followed each other trippingly, like members of a well-drilled ballet.

"It struck me as being an odd instrument for a snotty to tow around," Captain Vosper remarked ponderously. "I should have thought golf clubs or a hockey stick——" He appeared to lose interest in his subject, his voice trailed away and he became absorbed in a wart growing on his finger.

Doctor Toon briskly filled the gap: "Most suitable, I assure you, sir. Dallas is a musician by inclination, a Naval officer from misfortune."

"A nice thing to be said of Jackie Dallas's son!" Admiral Tresidder spoke indignantly. "Jackie was a martinet if ever there was one, but as soft as tow in the hands of his missus. Regular tartar she was, with the morals of Messalina."

"Not an unusual state of affairs, sir," said Doctor Toon with his sudden, disconcerting grin.

"How poor Jackie pinched and scraped to put his youngster into the Service! The miles of macaroni he consumed because it came cheaper than butchers' meat, and all for a thankless boy who scorns his blessings!"

"But does the Navy shower benedictions upon a youth of Colin's temperament?" asked the doctor suavely.

"If he deserves it!"

"Then poor Dallas does not, for he's always getting his leave jammed and is generally unpopular in the Gunroom. In extenuation he's a remarkably fine violinist, and for his genius he should be forgiven much."

"Bunkum!" said the Admiral.

The crunch of gravel and the dull thud of hoofs passing the windows created an opportune diversion.

"They've got a cab," Sophy proclaimed in loud relief.

She went into the hall, leaving the door open behind her, which gave Victoria an uninterrupted view of the porch and the sodden garden beyond. She watched the cab drive up, its crinkled hood shiny with rain, and saw Verena put out an exploratory foot, and, in descending, knock her head against the roof, a blow which sent her toque to a rakish angle over one eye. Hugging the violin, Verena climbed the steps, draggled, crestfallen, but preserving a precarious bravado. On entering the firelit hall her stiff, unnatural poise seemed to crumple up. Letting the violin fall with a hollow bump, she cast herself into the arms of her sister with the abandonment of a small girl returning woebegone from a disappointing party. The feelings of annoyance, distaste and boredom dominating the tall willowy young man who followed were conveyed to Victoria with the sharpness of electric shocks. His state of mind made a greater impression upon her than his looks, which would have entranced her in the ordinary way, for Colin Dallas was beautiful, with the cold soulless beauty of a Greek statue. Temper even failed to disturb the tranquillity of his features, his expression merely became more stony, more withdrawn, more remote.

"You've dropped my violin," he jabbed Verena with a glance of ice.

Guiltily she stooped to pick it up. "It was only a very small fall."

"Sufficient to destroy a delicate instrument. Since you have so little sense of responsibility, you were mistaken in carrying it."

"The case slipped from my hand." Her tone was foolish.

Speechless with indignation, he carried the violin to the light.

"Is it damaged?"

"No, but it doesn't mitigate your carelessness."

Sophy, hovering about Verena like an anxious hen, turned upon the young man with as much fierceness as politeness would allow.

"You shouldn't harp upon your grievance—Verena is sorry and that is sufficient."

"I'm not so sure!" The concentrated bitterness of a tedious afternoon sounded in his voice.

"Ample reparation, considering the fiddle isn't even cracked."

She turned her back upon the young man. "Come to tea, my lovey—you're not so damp that you need change until afterwards." Supporting Verena to the drawing-room, she propped her in the vacant end of the sofa with cushions collected from various parts of the room. Meanwhile Colin moodily divested himself of his coat and sauntered after them.

"Glad to see you, Dallas!" said Admiral Tresidder. "You can have my place, I've just finished." The young man subsided into the vacant chair, and helped himself to a slab of Madeira cake.

"Jam!" he said with laconic expectation. The near proximity of so handsome an Adonis reduced Victoria to almost imbecile embarrassment.

"Jam!" he reiterated more impatiently.

"There isn't any—it's drawing-room tea."

"There should be. When I marry I shall expect my wife to provide both jam and honey at all meals."

"I don't care for honey." Although anxious to please, Victoria was determined to introduce a personal note.

"How very odd!" Colin selected sugar biscuits with chilly disdain.

Victoria, feeling crushed, lapsed into the semi-trance-like condition which so often overcame her at parties. She seemed to separate into two individuals—one a plain, stupid child who sat lumpishly in a chair, the other a detached personage of indefinite antiquity who watched the struttings of her fellow-pilgrims across a gulf of infinite experience. The party round the fire seemed to diminish in consequence. No longer were they vested with the glamour surrounding mature persons when wearing their best clothes and society manners. The concealing polish which uniformly varnished discrepancies in tastes and aims dissolved into a thin film, showing the company as an ill-assorted bunch of individuals lacking synchronous thought. They were beleaguered, and huddled together merely for mutual support against the universal fear of loneliness.

"Blowing up for a gale!" Captain Vosper ponderously broke the silence.

"Glass is falling," Admiral Tresidder supplemented.

"It's a foul climate! Why I winter in this country I can't imagine. At one time I never dreamed of remaining in England after October." Mrs. Tresidder extracted a cigarette from a gold case and made a futile attempt to light it with a patent igniter. Doctor Toon provided a match.

"Our climate is naturally less trying to us than to those who have cosmopolitan ancestors," Miss Tresidder observed in a silky voice, "and there is nothing to prevent you wintering abroad, Miriam. There are many admirable foreign countries—I understand Palestine has most salubrious weather."

Mrs. Tresidder seemed to swell with indignation, she looked like a devastating goddess. Victoria trembled for the tiny drawing-room chair quaking beneath the weight of so much splendid flesh.

"Do you suggest that I am not English?"

Miss Tresidder momentarily quailed. "Oh, I didn't mean anything!"

"I should think not! My father's name—Montague Curzon—speaks for itself."

"It does, indeed!" There is a quelling quality in the Victorian manner, a finality, a decision, a hint of superiority and ridicule which intimidates the less refined. Miss Tresidder experienced the fleeting pleasure of victory. She fitted the dirty cups together in pairs and reclined them on foundations of saucers, a complacent smile upon her lips. Silence had again stricken the company. Admiral Tresidder puffed heavily at a cigar; Verena, closely observed by Doctor Toon, twisted her handkerchief between her fingers and gazed adoringly at Colin, who in turn gloomily regarded the cabbage roses patterning the carpet. Victoria, meanwhile, pondered upon the affinity existing between Captain Vosper's beard and an Arab fly-whisk hanging in an ornamental capacity on the wall behind him.

Miss Tresidder hopefully addressed Colin: "Won't you give us a little music? Something soothing."

"That divine serenade," Verena sighed ecstatically.

"Which?"

"Oh, *the* one—you know," she rejoined vaguely.

"No, I don't, but it doesn't signify because I shouldn't play it." Every one winced at such youthful candour; Mrs. Tresidder's beautifully reddened lips parted in a malicious smile.

"Bach's Sonata in E major?" she suggested with an exasperating air of knowledge.

"I thought the Barcarolle." He was deferential.

She swept the company with a comprehensive glance. "Perhaps you're right. I'll play your accompaniment."

"I shall do that." Verena rose from her cushions.

"Oh, I wouldn't, dear," Miss Tresidder remonstrated. But Verena was settled on the square box-like stool, her hands suspended above the keyboard, each finger quirked intelligently. With a determined expression she struggled through the opening bars, indifferent to time, intent only upon deciphering the music. Miss Tresidder sat with clenched hands, a look of anguish on her face. Admiral Tresidder, unconscious of discords, listened benignly. Colin Dallas, remote and austere, stood waiting. Verena pounded on, the tip of her tongue showing between her teeth.

"Now!" she said breathlessly.

Miraculously they started together. The notes of the violin soared above the dismal jog-trot of the accompaniment, the irresolute pauses, the spurts of familiarity.

Mrs. Tresidder began to laugh.

"You shouldn't, oh, you shouldn't!" Miss Tresidder whispered apprehensively.

The unequal race went on, the piano sometimes lagging, sometimes racing ahead, for whatever happened in the treble Verena maintained a monotonous plunking in the base. Presently she began to waver. She looked round and saw the eager watchfulness of her audience and recollected once having seen just such expressions on the faces of a street crowd watching the acrobatic antics of a cripple: a blending of compassion with vindictiveness and amusement. She struggled against a familiar sense of

defeat, a strange death-like numbness ran through her limbs. Rising shakily and leaning against the piano for support, she spoke in a jerky, strangled voice:

"It's the heat after the cold wind—that's the reason I made a bungle of the accompaniment—the only reason. It's an awfully easy piece, really—I'm sure I knew it by heart before I was ten—so that proves I couldn't have failed for any other cause. But because the wind upset me, Miriam can take my place—only for this once."

She dropped limply into the chair close to Victoria; her face was in shadow, but a shaft of light from the lamp burning on the piano threw into relief her thin, restless hands plucking and plaiting the cloth of her dress.

Mrs. Tresidder, once more gracious and urbane, seated herself amidst much jangling of bracelets and rustling silk. Again Colin was rather unhappy in his partner, for although he had a large enough conception of the work, his tone was unequal in volume to the greater demands of his accompanist. Only Victoria, forgotten by her elders, was transported by the trite sweetness of the music into a silver region of romance, an enchanted vale from whence there is no return.

IV

IT had been decided that Victoria was to become a daily pupil at Miss Carver's school after the Christmas holidays; in the meantime she received instruction from Miss Tresidder. Starting with Scripture, they progressed to those illegitimate children of the multiplication table, pennyweights, poles or perches, puncheons and kilderkins, from whence it was but a short step to the probings of *The Child's Guide to Knowledge*.

Lessons were conducted in an upstairs room overlooking the kitchen garden that was brown and unkempt with last summer's ruin. Crucified fruit trees stretched gnarled arms against high brick walls topped with jagged teeth of glass; opposite the window was a green door leading to the potato field, and a potting-shed with a tall brick chimney. The field, divided by a hedge from the white road to Osmington, climbed the side of a hill; against the sky were three haystacks and a farm with pink walls and a lichened roof.

A mahogany table stood in the centre of the room and four chairs with arms and rush seats. In the window was a chintz-covered ottoman containing dressmaking materials; on a headless stand was a reproduction of Mrs. Tresidder's bust, waist and posterior, covered in brown sateen. There was a bookcase, a second ottoman apportioned to household mending and an upholstered contrivance of iron capable of elongation into a bed. Hanging upon the walls were copies of "The Soul's Awakening," "The Monarch of the Glen," and a shiny photo-

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graph of H.M.S. *Edgar* being launched at Devonport in 1893. Mr. George Alexander, wearing check trousers, a frock coat and a carnation, stood upon the mantelshelf between a pair of yellow china cats with abnormally long necks. Theoretically Victoria and her Aunt Sophy had exclusive possession of this room between the hours of ten and twelve daily; in reality Mrs. Tresidder invaded it on four mornings out of six in search of entertainment. Ensconced in an arm-chair and surrounded with dismembered carcasses of expensive gowns, she snipped an aggravating accompaniment to Miss Tresidder's questions.

"What act made Sir Walter Raleigh famous?"

"Finding tobacco," Victoria dourly replied.

"Quite right, dear, but there was something else."

"Smoking it."

"Don't be stupid, Vic—I know you can remember if you try."

"Think of a theatrical gesture designed to flatter an old maid," Mrs. Tresidder mischievously prompted.

"It is most kind of you to be so helpful, Miriam," Aunt Sophy answered sarcastically; "but the incident to which you refer so elegantly was not the one in my mind. As you are so well informed, perhaps you will tell us who introduced the cherry tree into Ireland?"

"You've got the *Child's Guide*, therefore it's unnecessary for me to repeat what you know already."

"Tell me, Victoria, who planted the first cherry tree in Ireland?"

"You've skipped—we've only got as far as 'What is caraway seed?' "

"You are expected to take an intelligent interest in all the questions and answers. However, I'll read it. You may be enlightened also, Miriam. 'Q.: Whence have

we cherries? A.: This well-known fruit formerly grew wild in the woods near Cerasus, in Pontus. Q.: Where is Pontus? A.: On the southern coast of the Black Sea. Q.: Who first brought them to Rome? A.: Lucullus, a Roman general. Q.: Who first planted them in Ireland? A.: Sir Walter Raleigh, on his estate at Youghal.' I hope you will confess, Miriam, that you did not know this curious fact about the cherry."

"Neither did you when you started the argument—you caught sight of it whilst flicking the pages. That horrible little volume is calculated to manufacture prigs wholesale."

"It contains most valuable information; Verena and I were brought up on it."

"Any *schmuck* could tell that!"

"Unfortunately its good influence and sound instruction have been confined to the upper *British* classes!" Discreetly triumphant, Sophy turned to Victoria. "Bring your sewing, there's time for ten minutes hemming before twelve o'clock."

Going to the ottoman, Victoria extracted a large linen sheet being turned "sides-to-middle" for use upon Polly Anker's bed. She carried it to the table and began to join the pieces with minute stitches.

"It seems stupid to give that child sewing lessons when she's more skilled than you are," Mrs. Tresidder frankly remarked.

"I disagree."

"The fact speaks for itself, only you won't admit it. I believe when you're dead your corpse will sit up and contradict the doctor."

"I dislike jest upon sacred subjects."

Victoria continued to sew, apparently unheeding the bickering of her elders. She had become accustomed to

Tarbubbles and its discords, and knew just how much and how little to expect. Verena alone had the interest of uncertainty. Her strange fickle character precariously balanced between the extremes of despair and exultation had a magnetic quality lacking in the voluptuous charms of Mrs. Tresidder or the conscientious endeavours of Sophy. Crushed by a sense of inferiority, intensified by a succession of romantic defeats, Verena turned for reassurance to women. Her dark path was lighted by sudden flares of passionate friendships which as swiftly died, leaving a long track of ashes stretching behind her through the years. As a spider binds a fly into a helpless bundle with finely spun threads, so did she stifle criticism and hostility with hypnotic spells. She took infinite pains to cajole and fascinate, feigning interest and sympathy in order to achieve her ends. But after kindling a fire and fanning it to artificial warmth she wearied of feeding the devouring flame. She became bored. Her victim's complacent assumption that affection was reciprocated became increasingly exasperating. Verena found there is an even greater satisfaction in destruction than in creation. She smashed ruthlessly, thinking of fresh bonds to kindle, new flames to light.

§

Released from the thraldom of learning, Victoria hurried to Verena's room isolated in a separate wing. It was built over the kitchens and had windows at either end, one faced the sea and the other looked obliquely across Lodmoor to the amphitheatre of green hills beyond. She found her young aunt seated in a big chair before the fire; on a table beside her stood a coffee-pot, cups and saucers, biscuits and a big box of chocolates.

"I made Nanny wait to bring coffee until you were free. Here it is, all hot and steaming."

"And lovely chocolates—you are kind!"

"Aren't they ripping? A man I know sent them. He keeps me supplied with goodies—I never buy." She darted a flickering glance at Victoria and looked away.

"It must be pleasant to be grown up and be given things," said Victoria enviously.

"It isn't bad, but only attractive women receive presents—ordinary ones get nothing. It must be dreadful for them!"

"I like the roses on the lid," Victoria interrupted irrelevantly. "Will you give me the box when it's empty?"

"I might—I won't promise."

"Mrs. Tresidder was unpicking clothes again this morning."

"Cat!" Verena ejaculated virulently.

"She is generous—she gave me five shillings yesterday."

"That's nothing to her—she's sacks of money. She wouldn't do a big thing for you as I would!"

"What would you do?"

"Oh, something noble. Shoulder the burden of your guilt or take some tremendous risk to save you."

"Do you know where cherries come from?" Victoria changed the subject brusquely. The boastful note so prevalent in Verena's conversation made her vaguely uncomfortable, just as if her aunt had suddenly torn off her clothes and revealed a scaled body instead of flesh. She thrust the impression from her with the aid of the commonplace.

"Kent, I suppose," Verena snapped.

"Cerasus in Pontus."

"It sounds like a Greek play!" She spoke discon-

tentedly, and then with renewed interest: "Have you seen my new bottle of medicine? It's a tonic containing a poisonous drug. Doctor Toon knows it. He's very interested in my case and is going to discuss it with our medical man."

"How beastly!"

"What do you mean? I think it gratifying that people are interested."

"But one doesn't talk about one's health to friends."

"Why not? I know they are trying to make me well and strong, so I forget any embarrassment I might feel and give them all the information I can." She spoke simperingly and played with the many rings on her fingers, taking them on and off and piling them in heaps upon her knee. Again Victoria felt impelled to introduce a different note.

"Those toys you promised to show me—can I see them?"

"I don't remember promising, but you may open the bottom drawer and take a peep."

Carved wooden animals, dolls still in the original cardboard boxes, furniture and miniature tea and dinner services filled the drawer to the brim. All the toys were new and bright, unlike those belonging to Sophy which bore the scars of usage. Victoria spread them out on the floor.

"You have kept them well; they look different to Aunt Sophy's."

"She was careless with her things."

Polly Anker came noiselessly into the room, wearing the felt slippers which displeased Miss Tresidder. She stood beside Victoria, unseen by Verena, and surveyed the collection with a disapproving expression on her fat, comfortable face.

"I don't like the way you speak of your sister, Miss

Rena. You smashed Miss Sophy's toys and hid yours like a little miser. I haven't forgotten the day you broke her new wax doll with the nursery poker, even if your memory's short!"

"It was only fun!" said Verena sulkily.

"Fun at somebody else's expense, and nothing to be proud of!"

"Children don't think."

"The fault of the child is the fault of the woman," Polly answered sententiously.

"You are beastly, Nanny, and I don't know what you mean either!"

"So you say, miss!" She started to collect the dirty cups.

Victoria noticed that the chocolates had disappeared and was surprised to see an end of the ribbon tie showing behind the cushion of Verena's chair.

§

In her rôle of prospective pupil Victoria accompanied her Aunt Sophy to the breaking-up party at Miss Carver's school, where they watched a number of earnest students receiving the works of L. T. Meade as rewards for learning, and later on the same little girls, dressed in pink muslin and wings, painstakingly balanced on their toes in a fairy ballet designed by the head mistress. As Miss Tresidder remarked, it had been a most enjoyable and instructive afternoon, and showed how much greater was the latitude allowed to children in 1902 than had been the case in her own youth when stage dancing was confined to actresses and their offspring. Both Victoria and her aunt were still under the spell of Miss Carver's party when they entered Tarbubbles, which doubtless accounted for their being more susceptible to atmosphere than on

ordinary humdrum days. Turmoil seemed to rush out of the open door, as if a stopper had been removed from a bottle releasing pungent fumes. They found Admiral Tresidder sitting on the corner of the high fender in the hall, dolorously cleaning a bundle of native spears with bits of worn emery-paper. He wore an old suit which fitted his plump limbs tightly and made his resemblance to an overgrown schoolboy more pronounced than usual. A look of relief crossed his face as they entered, and Victoria got the impression that her grandfather's novel occupation was not so artless as it appeared.

"Did you enjoy yourselves?" he asked absently.

"Very much; the pupils danced in a fairy ballet—'The Enchanted Glade'—on tip-toe." Aunt Sophy's voice dribbled away as her eyes rested upon an oily blade lying upon the white surface of the skin rug. "You might have spread a paper, father. Men are exasperating—when they clean one thing they dirty another. Challis must see what she can do with hot flour."

"She's given notice and is packing."

"Whatever for?"

"Due to some chocolates belonging to Miriam having disappeared from the dressing-table drawer where she put them last Thursday. She accuses Challis, and the girl's so angry she won't stay to see the matter through, which certainly looks suspicious. I wish she'd told me before she took them. I'd have bought her pounds of sweets rather than this should happen."

Shocked surprise marked Miss Tresidder's manner as she answered: "You couldn't possibly give your parlour-maid confectionery! In this house decorum is disregarded by every one save myself. Action should have been delayed until my return, when the matter could be in-

vestigated on proper lines. Miriam is impossible with servants."

Victoria pondered upon the etiquette for unmasking a pilferer. Evidently there was a proper and improper procedure for all occasions, a system which applied correct tone to unprecedented acts. Truth was less important than ceremony.

"Verena's done everything possible," said Admiral Tresidder unhappily. "She's shown remarkable tact—implored Challis to own up and all that—but the girl's stubborn and won't. It's brought on one of Miriam's attacks."

"I'd better go and see—I can't leave the house for an afternoon without something happening."

Mrs. Tresidder was discovered in the sewing-room hugging a hot-water bottle to her stomach. All her clothes were unfastened and she clutched them about her like a modern nymph going to the bath. Verena, interested and important, knelt upon the hearthrug, adding boiling water to a stiff glass of brandy. She looked up through a fringe of untidy hair, her baby face prettily flushed with the heat from the fire.

"Poor Miriam has become ill through the awful way Challis has gone on. You'd hardly credit the things that girl said—and I'd always thought her so refined!"

"I hope I haven't accused her wrongly. Fancy taking such trash when my pearls were alongside!" Mrs. Tresidder, looking worried and miserable, clawed her stays together with a jewelled, olive-skinned hand.

"Don't trouble, Miriam; of course you've done rightly. It's one's duty to apprehend a thief—one can't tell where dishonesty will end. One simply daren't be merciful." Verena spoke soothingly, avoiding Victoria's gaze.

"What was the box like?" asked Sophy.

"Square, with red roses on the lid, and tied with green ribbon. Captain Vosper sent it before he sailed, and I intended it for Victoria, as I like only good chocolates and these cost a paltry two shillings a pound." Mrs. Tresidder shifted the hot-water bottle and rocked herself backwards and forwards in mental or physical anguish. "Just to think that Challis is a *gonof!*" she moaned.

"A what, Miriam?" asked Aunt Sophy.

"A thief, you silly *goyah!*" Her voice rose in shrill exasperation. "You stand talking and talking, asking foolish questions whilst my stomach's aching as if a rat were gnawing my intestines."

"Of course if you're going to be indecent and hysterical——"

"You've no sympathy, Sophy. I've noticed it before," said Verena reprovingly. "Because you're strong you think delicate people are acting when they become overwrought. But I have suffered and can sympathize with Miriam."

"No commiseration is extended to me for losing a valuable maid, who will probably sue us for libel. The world is out of hand in these days; nothing has been right since the Queen died. Come along, Victoria, and take your coat off—this is no scene for you." Miss Tresidder slammed the door and propelled her niece across the landing to her room, where they found Polly Anker turning down the bed.

"Has Challis gone?"

"Yes, shaken the dust of Tarbubbles off her feet," Polly sourly replied.

"It's very provoking, and so common! Mrs. Tresidder has lapsed into Yiddish as she invariably does in a crisis, she's décolleté the whole way down and is describ-

ing her indisposition in most indelicate terms. But what does surprise me is Verena's change of face."

"She's up to her tricks again—all sweet blandishment, a sure warning of trouble!" said Polly.

§

Instead of being overwhelmed by a guilty conscience, Verena seemed to thrive upon perfidy. On Victoria's side their relationship became strained; she endured all the sufferings proper to a thief, whilst Verena flaunted an intensified innocence. This ability to turn a moral somersault with unruffled mien was profoundly shocking, especially as Verena obviously expected admiration for agility. Victoria found it increasingly difficult to meet her aunt's eyes at meals, and enduring a chronic state of embarrassment made herself quite ill, whereupon Miss Tresidder put her to bed and dosed her with castor oil, an unmerited penalty which intensified her distaste for guileful practices. On returning to the family life, she found Verena and Mrs. Tresidder joined in an inseparable alliance, an astonishing confederacy after their former animosity. This new segregation of the household threw Victoria and her Aunt Sophy together for entertainment. Acting upon each other like two pieces of sandpaper, they derived an exasperated satisfaction from the friction.

A new parlourmaid succeeded the discredited Challis. The incident of the chocolate box was forgotten, and so enthralled was Verena in her new conquest that she displayed little interest when Colin Dallas came to Tarbubbles for leave prior to sailing for the Cape in the New Year.

V

THE brougham crawled like a fly along the straight white road running from Furzy Cliff to Greenhill. Within, in close and uncomfortable proximity, were Admiral Tresidder, Mrs. Tresidder and Verena: the former bound for the General Post Office to send telegrams about Palembang Rails which were on the brink of liquidation, the latter *en route* for London.

Neither Mrs. Tresidder nor Verena evinced sympathy in the rail crisis, being engrossed with thoughts centring round Mr. Beerbohm Tree, Mr. George Alexander, and Mr. John Hare, whom they were going to see in London. Such lack of interest was understandable in Mrs. Tresidder, who had a large income amassed by the commercial astuteness of Sir Montague Curzon, but was less comprehensible in Verena who would share the Admiral's small fortune with her sister. Miss Tresidder alone appreciated the magnitude of the disaster, the Admiral being upheld by the excitement which sustains investors and prompts them to dispatch telegrams. Having no such outlet for her feelings, Miss Tresidder, as she ordered the Sunday beef and counted the laundry, brooded upon bogus companies, credulous Naval officers, and three thousand pounds of jeopardized capital. Only at meals could she vent her accumulated deductions. They invariably displeased the Admiral, partly because they cast doubts upon his sagacity, partly because he objected to the feminine habit of leaping from conclusion to conclusion, shirking the tedious crawl from one fact to another which is the mascu-

line practice and therefore correct. He protested that it was *ultra vires* to condemn the directors of the Palembang Rails until they were proved rogues, just as it was premature to count the money as lost until the Company was in the hands of the Official Receiver. Miss Tresidder reasserted that the directors were swindlers and the money gone, and please not to mention equity to her again because she wouldn't stand it.

Relying upon the unwritten code which makes one man support another in difficult situations, the Admiral appealed in this dilemma to Colin Dallas, only to find that the young man did not conform to the principles of his profession and upbringing. Indeed, he argued that if scheming for unearned money were nefarious, then the directors were rogues, but as the investor had hoped for 60 per cent dividend his avarice was no less. *Ergo:* how separate the guilt of the one from the guilt of the other? Such reasoning was distasteful to the Admiral and in no way commended itself to Sophy. She found Colin's broadmindedness a most irritating characteristic, especially as she thought it arose from perverseness.

Colin tolerated the traditions of his environment because it was less trouble to submit than to strive against the ideals which governed his class. Although far from indifferent to money and luxury, he was unable to appreciate the urge which compelled men to seek wealth when they already possessed a competency. Admiral Tresidder's pursuit of money was as comic as the idea of a man adding joints of meat to a full larder. He saw no reason to stigmatize as rogues financiers who supply senile gentlemen with fictitious investments, any more than he would censure butchers who unload tainted meat upon prosperous gluttons. In each case they employed wits

against wealth. Colin considered riches the meanest weapon in the civilized armament. At the same time he felt a tepid sympathy for Sophy Tresidder watching her patrimony go without the fun of dissipating it, although, as a general principle, he had less toleration for entailed wealth than for any other kind; it merely encouraged parasites to depend for existence upon the miserly propensities of predecessors. He swept wealth, property and prudence into the limbo of the unimportant. Personal development was the only thing which mattered, the power to express yourself as an individual. The governing classes, including Admirals and Captains, underrated the importance of personal magnetism, being content to enforce a traditional submission. Colin did not venerate tradition and believed that every man had a right to his own life and his own way of living, forgetting that he owed civilization to the exertions of past generations, and that but for bygone struggles he might be maintaining a precarious existence in a primeval forest. He demanded the leisure earned by billions of forgotten toilers, the cultured art of centuries, yet resented being a part of the defensive system which assured the possession of these things. He cultivated his natural antipathy for organized effort, and enjoyed lavishing bitter compassion upon persons working for the benefit of communities.

Missing the angry monologue which had accompanied his meditations, Colin became aware that Miss Tresidder's verbal attacks upon her parent had diminished in volume to a mere dribble, like the tricklings of a tap from an empty cistern. He deplored the custom which compelled visitors politely to sit long after the unimportant members of the household had obtained release. Enviously he watched Victoria cross the garden to the gate and

commence to climb the winding path to the Coastguard cottages. Verena also had abandoned the gutted breakfast table. Outside in the hall her agitated voice rose and fell, accompanying the bumping progress of luggage coming down the stairs.

Miss Tresidder brought her grievances to a close with a tearful gulp.

"Palembang Rails brings your losses up to five thousand pounds in nine months."

"What of it?" returned the Admiral testily. "I'm constantly reiterating, 'What one loses on the swings one makes up on the roundabouts,'" a rejoinder which brought the inharmonious meal to an end.

Colin got up and stood at the window watching Victoria's purple coat making a slow-moving patch of colour against the headland. He decided to follow.

§

From the top of Furzy Cliff Victoria looked back at the scoop of Weymouth Bay filled with cold green water and edged all the way round with a narrow rim of white concrete ending in the pier and its wedding-cake opera house. Red-brick Georgian terraces followed each other round the curve from Pulteney Buildings to St. John's Church with its spire pointing like a thin needle to heaven. Afterwards came shaggy green cliffs, and finally the silver waste of Lodmoor stretching to the distant circle of hills.

She watched the brougham emerge from Tarbubbles and crawl slowly along the straight white road beside the marsh. When it had diminished to a black speck, she turned and walked along the cliff until she found a boulder to sit on. She could no longer see Weymouth.

Portland frowned grimly at her across the water. To the east ranged tall white cliffs and long sandy beaches edged with little waves like frills of fine lace. Gulls floated and swooped and clamoured on ledges of rock; a cormorant stood on a pinnacle and dried its wings, another dived in the shallows after fish. Around her were tufts of brown heather, patches of chalk, and gorse bushes showing a few venturesome yellow buds.

She enjoyed the peace of solitude, and experienced a danger thrill and the uneasy prick of conscience: combined emotions which prevented the appreciation of forbidden adventure to the anticipated degree. Aunt Sophy expressly forbade unaccompanied wanderings upon the cliffs, and walks on the dry edges of Lodmoor. Remained coupled with this embargo scraps of whispered confidences overheard between Polly Anker and the parlourmaid in which "ran for her life," "a man with no clothes on," and "tumbled down a rabbit-hole" left uneasy impressions.

Life seemed composed of intangible dangers and vague apprehensions, which, without materializing, maintained ascendancy like eerie phantoms waiting to pounce. For this reason Victoria looked forward to school. She recollected from her limited experience of juvenile society that little girls were free of the complexities which made grown-ups so disquieting. Their characteristics were clear cut and sharp. If they thieved they were found out and slapped; if they lied a similar fate befell; but mature persons evaded punishment and multiplied their sins with impunity. Sadly she reflected that all her relations were concealing something and pretending to be what they weren't. Even Aunt Sophy borrowed her behaviour from the book of etiquette lying on her bedside table.

It was a pity God believed in mixing contrasting souls

together; if they blended, everything would be so much more comfortable—all the blue souls in one house and the green ones in another, and so on. She supposed this arrangement would make the world too comfortable, a state of things which the Bible clearly indicated was not intended.

Victoria's aberrant attitude to religion was a serious vexation to Miss Tresidder. Her mind seemed to repel proper instruction and she had strange ideas which did not emanate from recognized doctrines. Her demeanour in church was deplorable. On the previous Sunday, when offered a Prayer Book by the People's Warden, Victoria loudly proclaimed that she preferred to make up her own prayers as occasion arose, and that God was more likely to be found on the Downs than in a church smelling of decay, hassocks, and white kid gloves. In consultation the vicar's wife had been reassuring. Girls of Victoria's age were often odd; she'd be all right when she reached her teens. Mrs. Macmullin counselled early Confirmation, as the rite had a stabilizing effect. In the meanwhile Miss Tresidder did what she could to modify irreligious tendencies and Victoria continued to think of God in terms of colloquial familiarity.

She was startled when Colin Dallas climbed the slope towards her. He wore a thick blue overcoat, a gift from the Admiral, which persisted in retaining an ovoid shape acquired from the contour of its late owner, and as it flapped in an elderly manner, seemed to deprecate the outgrown flannel trousers with which it associated.

Hitherto Victoria had admired the young man across the gulf which yawns between mature beauty and plain immaturity: a gulf widened by the mysterious power of sex. She had no easy familiarity with little boys in the

process of being bathed, dosed with castor oil, or having their ears forcibly washed. Men were completed mysteries, endowed with disastrously magnetic qualities which lured beautiful women to destruction. Furthermore she suspected them of being responsible for much of the uneasy emotion which made life so uncomfortable.

Knowing her humble place in the thoughts of such ambiguous creatures, she expected Colin to pass on with a nod of recognition. Instead, he crossed the intervening grass and sat down.

"I watched you climb the hill whilst listening to your aunt wrangling with the old man over money. There is something indecent about cash discussions in mixed company."

Victoria acquiesced.

"Not that I despise capital, but I condemn finance as a hobby. Your grandfather had an income as large as was good for him until he got the notion that he was a potential Rothschild. I wonder what the ravishing Verena will do when she is left a penniless orphan."

He laughed and a sneer crossed his face like a shadow. Putting his hands into his pockets, he produced a plug of navy tobacco screwed in a bit of newspaper, a short black pipe, a jack-knife, an orange stick, a bit of emery-board and fragments of envelopes scrawled with music, which he deposited unceremoniously in Victoria's lap. He took the sticky fid of tobacco and began to shred it with the knife. As his hands were exceptionally white and shapely with long sensitive fingers ending in beautifully manicured nails, the incongruity was pronounced. This, coupled with his contemptuous manner and his fierce way of setting to work, repelled Victoria. At the same time she was fascinated by his dark beauty and lithe,

graceful body. Watching him she was reminded of the undressed Greek statues in museums which grown-ups pretend not to see.

His nose was flat at the bridge and sprang straightly from his forehead; his mouth was red and bow-shaped, the upper lip slightly overlapping the under, which gave his face the supercilious expression proper to mythological gods. His hair was dark and curly, matching an olive skin; eyes of vivid blue fringed with black lashes gave a bizarre touch to his swarthy colouring.

Having got his pipe alight, he threw himself back on the grass with hands clasped behind his head and scrutinized Victoria intently.

"Are you going to be a lady like your aunts when you grow up?"

"I don't suppose so—Aunt Sophy thinks I am unadaptable."

"There is a pronounced streak of truth in your character. You may become a reformer like Olive Christian Malvery—if you escape being a malcontent."

"Are they not ladies?" she asked in what she hoped was an intelligent manner.

"Reformers are rarely ladies: propriety and progress being incompatible."

"Perhaps ladies will go out of fashion," she said hopefully.

"They may. The quality has deteriorated since the gallant Edward ascended the throne."

"And mal—something which you said I might be if I didn't take up reforming?"

"Any one can be a malcontent, it's the most prevalent form of failure. Your Aunt Verena's one example, and unless I'm careful I shall be another."

"Women must be what they can. Men may do anything, even to eating partly cooked eggs with their mouths open." She was disconcerted at the hilarity which greeted her observation and blushed hotly. "But men do: I watched granddaddy this morning and nobody remarked, although they looked pained. If I ate with my mouth open, I should be held up as an object of ridicule."

"Age must have compensations to make it bearable. I never grudge the Olympians their laxity, I only resent their assumption of authority over the young."

"Perhaps you'll be an Admiral yourself one day."

"Heaven forbid! Two stripes are my objective, then I quit."

"Whatever will you do?"

"Study the violin in Munich or Dresden. A snotty with musical ambitions is a target for Gunroom wit, so I keep my intentions to myself. Service people persist in confounding musicians with organgrinders and German bandsmen, an attitude which embitters a temperament like mine."

Victoria received this confidence with gratitude. Her pride in being so singled out raised Colin in her esteem and laid any doubts as to his integrity.

He continued flatteringly: "I tell you these things because you're a sympathetic little soul and a fellow must let off steam sometimes."

"I'll keep your secret always," she promised enthusiastically.

"Oh, you needn't do that. I don't mind people knowing: the trouble is that they are too self-centred to listen."

At this her pride quivered and deflated like a pricked balloon. Instead of possessing some special quality which attracted confidence, she was reduced to the negative rôle

of safety-valve. Any one would have done as well! Aunt Sophy, Verena, even Polly Anker. Superiority lay in the fact that she happened to be there and they did not. But her dudgeon passed unnoticed by Colin, upheld as he was by the happy assurance of the egoist.

"When I've done two years as Lieutenant I mean to be invalided. The gratuity will pay for a course under some really good master."

"But you can't unless you're ill." Victoria spoke with the dismay of one reared upon Service traditions.

Colin, who despite his training had absorbed little of the atmosphere which makes the Navy what it is, regarded her scornfully.

"I can if I convince a Medical Board that I am incapable of discharging my duty in His Majesty's ships."

"That would be fraud."

"Wasn't it fraud to pack me off to sea when I had no interest in the life at all? Why should I spend my youth learning scientific destruction when my inclination is to create peace and beauty? My father and your grandfather chose my career to please themselves, and, incidentally, wasted a lot of good money."

"But it wasn't yours."

He waved aside the interruption. "I never asked to be born. I was thrust into the world, therefore I must be provided with the means of assisting myself."

"It sounds all right when you put it so."

He shrugged his shoulders and threw his hands out in a foreign gesture. "Primitive justice! If my capital is confined in Government coffers it must be extracted. It will be a battle of wit against might, of David against Goliath."

Victoria, feeling like an accessory in crime, enjoyed a

thrill in listening to such revolutionary intentions from one who an hour before had seemed so splendid and so remote. If the splendour had declined in any way on a nearer view, it was counterbalanced by illusion, just as the Aurora may be eclipsed by an adjacent Catherine wheel.

VI

CHRISTMAS at Tarbubbles passed in the atmosphere of sanctified gluttony peculiar to the festival, and differed little from others recollected by Victoria, save that the harmony was unbecomingly disturbed by Mrs. Tresidder and Verena having returned from London on antagonistic terms. They manifested their hostility in different ways, Verena maintaining a silence bristling with acrimony, Mrs. Tresidder giving vent to her feelings in voluble English interspersed with Yiddish, a lapse of good taste so pointedly ignored by Miss Tresidder that it acquired additional importance.

In Christmas week Palembang Rails liquidated themselves and gained unexpected notoriety from the suicide of the Company's chairman in lurid and improper circumstances, which furnished the halfpenny press with welcome grist. A photograph appeared of Admiral Tresidder in bathing costume, together with portraits of other deluded shareholders, and was the foundation for much fiery correspondence, and like other righteous causes burnt itself out with its own intensity. Even Miss Tresidder philosophically accepted disaster when it actually happened and showed Victoria that mental visualization is much more real than reality.

After being present at several skirmishes which disturbed the peace, Colin Dallas betook himself to the drawing-room frozen in its weekday rest, to draw anguished moans from his violin. Victoria was invited to strike accompanying notes on the piano, which fell thinly on the air like drops of chilly water.

When he left to join his ship on the last day of the year Tarbubbles seemed to coalesce, as if, having thrust out the alien, it drew together to brood upon itself.

Verena's speechless feud with her stepmother now extended to the remainder of the household. She spent her days in her bedroom, descending only for meals, when she sat in proud isolation which cast a blight upon appetite. Fortunately Mrs. Tresidder soon retired to bed, suffering from a mysterious malady needing for its alleviation strong brandy and hot water: a fortunate circumstance, as her verbal attacks upon Verena's impenetrable silence exposed the remainder of the family to a fusillade of flying invective. When Miss Tresidder heard that Verena was attending Mass at the Roman Catholic Church on the Dorchester Road her recaptured tranquillity deserted her. In the emergency she turned for support to her father, who proved a poor solace, being one of those who not only assert their belief in religious fredom, but carry it into practice, which is not so common. She then turned to her stepmother, who she thought could be relied upon to have no sympathy with Rome.

Accompanied by Victoria, she entered the sick-room late in the afternoon and found the invalid propped with pillows and surrounded with fashion papers. A smell of patchouli, brandy, medicine and blankets permeated the room; a fire burned in the grate and a syringe lay in a soapy puddle on the washstand.

"How do you feel?" Miss Tresidder inquired perfunctorily.

"Something awful! I'm as tight as a sausage, yet I must eat or I shall die of a decline like my sister Beenah —peace be upon her!"

She groaned and rubbed her stomach under the bed-

clothes. Her thick black hair was braided into two long plaits; a lace cap with tumbled ribbons framed her face; a nightdress trimmed with lace insertion inadequately covered her bosom. Such voluptuous charms spreading in untrammelled abandon on the bed seemed to accentuate her stepdaughter's lean virginity to the latter's disadvantage. As if aware of this circumstance, Sophy retorted acrimoniously, "You don't look like dying!"

"That cannot be judged by onlookers—I alone know what I suffer!"

"Quite! It should be a personal matter." Miss Tresidder conveyed much ladylike rebuke into her tone. "But I came to consult you about Verena. Are you aware she is attending the Roman Catholic Church accompanied by two nuns from the Convent?"

"How should I know what she's doing? She dropped me like a common *gonof* after I had spent much good money on her. Nevertheless, I congratulate the nuns on their *metsiah!*"

"Naturally they would be delighted to inveigle an Admiral's daughter from her faith. But why is she so weak? We have a most worthy vicar, and the English Church has sufficed generations of Tresidders."

"Mr. Macmullin is stout and wears ill-fitting false teeth; furthermore, he has a wife and eight children afflicted with adenoids. The priest, whom I know by sight, is gaunt, with a black chin and romantic brown eyes; besides, he wears a cassock and is denied a wife and family. What further reasons do you seek?"

"None of them bear upon the case; they are all wide of the mark. If there is one thing I can do, it is to stick to the point," said Miss Tresidder with some complacency.

"On the contrary, Sophy, you don't recognize the

point when you meet it." Mrs. Tresidder smiled in a knowing secretive fashion and patted the bows on her nightdress. Both the smile and the gesture seemed to indicate that Sophy Tresidder was absurdly ingenuous.

"I don't know what you insinuate—you always contrive to give unpleasant twists to the most innocent topics. I wouldn't come to you were I not at my wit's end. I bear everything at Tarbubbles and receive no help or sympathy from any of you." Miss Tresidder's face puckered in a distressing fashion, her nose became pink and two tears brimmed over and zigzagged down her cheeks.

"*Achi-nebbich*, you shouldn't take on so. You can't expect women to live beneath one roof without anger, it isn't in nature." Miriam looked repentant as Sophy broke into noisy sobs. "You take too much responsibility upon yourself. In trying to manage the lives of others you contrive to make us all uncomfortable. You judge like Jehovah, but without His wisdom. It is better not to interfere, as you can make no difference—we shall all behave as suits us best. You should be tolerant, then we should be happier."

"I shall continue to follow my conscience," said Sophy Tresidder.

§

Miss Carver's school occupied a red-brick house in Gloucester Terrace, adjoining the maritime residence of King George III. Every house had four storeys with three flat windows to every floor, each one protected by a sunblind. All were painted alike and all hid themselves behind the same sort of curtains, which gave the row a very genteel and united appearance. Fences

and little plots of grass separated the terrace from the road, which was in turn divided from the promenade by a low evergreen hedge.

Miss Carver ostensibly conducted a school for the daughters of officers, but as this clientele was a fluctuating one she was obliged to form a nucleus with the offspring of local tradesmen. Miss Carver was understood socially to have descended from something much higher in Salisbury. To support this theory was a picture of the cathedral hanging over the schoolroom mantelpiece, and in the parlour (where some of the pupils ate boiled mutton and tapioca pudding at one o'clock) were photographs of Deans and Canons and a party of bell-ringers celebrating Queen Victoria's second jubilee. Miss Carver's age was indefinite. She had yellow hair and a jaundiced skin, and wore about her neck a flannel band imperfectly concealed by a wrapping of ecru lace. On her tongue she balanced a lozenge exuding warm odours of black currant, which, allied with the flannel, was supposed to ward off quinsy, a complaint to which she was prone.

On the first morning of the term Victoria found herself one of a row of little girls sitting at long desks arranged at right angles to the windows. The fire was directly behind her and unpleasantly scorched her back; in front were two further lines of desks, leaving a space for a blackboard and the dais enthroning Miss Carver. On the wall facing the pupils was a map of the world and a larger one of England.

The presence of so many children distracted Victoria, and the discovery that she did not know so much as she had imagined on the previous day disheartened her. Information contained in *The Child's Guide to Knowledge* was at a discount. No curiosity was evinced in the culti-

vation of capers, the manufacture of porcelain, or the invention of kamptulicon; instead, the class concerned itself with intricate combinations of figures and the dissection of long sentences into separate words for classification as "parts of speech." Victoria endeavoured to arrange the figures in an orderly manner, but failed to make anything of the other problem, and ended by watching her fellow-victims grappling according to their capacity with the conundrums. A fair little girl with opalescent skin and wearing a green frock protected by a frilled pinafore sat on one side, on the other a dark child with curls hanging round her head like attenuated sausages. In front at the next line of desks was a fidget with a peaky precocious face and sly green eyes. Her soiled cotton drawers were much in evidence as she lifted her red plush dress every time she sat down. She wore a turquoise ring and a locket.

At eleven o'clock Miss Carver descended from her throne and left the class to itself, whereupon all the little girls extracted small luncheon packets from their desks.

"Haven't you brought any elevenses?" asked the child in the plush dress, who appeared to be unwanted by anybody.

"No," answered Victoria.

"I've got sardine sandwiches and two kinds of cake. You can have some if you like," she said offhandedly.

"I'm not hungry," Victoria lied.

"Don't have any, then!" She took a large bite and masticated loudly. Through her open mouth the sardine and bread could be seen in the process of disintegration. She swallowed, and remarked: "My name's Vera Gladys Dibb."

"Is it?"

"Of course it is. My Pa keeps Dibb's Stores in St. Thomas's Street." This information was thrown at Victoria as if it were a challenge.

"I do not know the shops."

"Perhaps you're a Navy-ite?" Miss Dibb sounded aggressive. "What is your Pa, anyway?"

"A two-and-a-half striper."

"Sounds like a guard on a train! My people are very particular who I associate with. We visit Mr. and Mrs. Mimms of the 'Red Lion' and Mr. Brenteno of the Rink."

It was noticeable that all the other little girls had drawn away from Miss Dibb, and that the more marked her isolation the louder were her assertions of superiority. As she talked she danced and pirouetted self-consciously, and quirked the finger wearing the ring.

"Is your Pa a guard?" she asked hopefully.

"I've told you, he's a Lieutenant in the Navy."

"Story-teller!" promptly responded Miss Dibb.

"You should verify before denying," Victoria aptly quoted her Aunt Sophy.

"I-diddily-i-tie!" sang Miss Dibb derisively. There was a further withdrawal of the young ladies. "What's the name of your Pa?"

"Lionel Tresidder."

"Any relation of the old Admiral?" she asked with diminished assurance.

"He's my Granddaddy."

"My Pa provisions him, but we don't visit because it's too far out of town."

With recovered nonchalance she pranced across to a group near the window to return with surprising sudden-

ness. She sidled up to Victoria: "I know how babies come!" she said in a thick, ingratiating whisper. "I'll tell you if you like." A furtive, gloating expression was on her sallow little face. She rocked backwards and forwards on her heels and toes, watching Victoria with shifty green eyes.

"I don't care for babies, and you can't tell me anything I don't know," Victoria responded grandly.

"Guess you're talking large—expect you'd look under mulberry bushes for them!"

"Possibly."

"Hoo—you are a sumph!"

§

With a sense of angry defeat Victoria climbed into the carrier's cart which was to take her back to Tarbubbles. The day had been devoted to a ruthless exposure of her defective education before a roomful of little girls who tittered appreciatively. Miss Carver had probed and delved into Victoria's mind with untiring energy, casting out facts with the zeal of a housewife throwing junk from a lumber-room.

When the class adjourned at four o'clock, Miss Dibb was profuse in her offers of sympathy, although her titters had been amongst the loudest.

"Carver's dotty!" she asserted whilst struggling to overcome the natural hostility of an unlined serge coat to the sleeves of her plush dress. "It's not as if she were a lady—she's quite poor!"

"Money doesn't count!"

"Hoo, doesn't it? You go trying to be a lady without any and see what you make of it!"

As the cart jolted along the sea front in the raw Jan-

uary twilight, Victoria desperately counted the years likely to be dedicated to education. At the lowest they could not number less than six: a dreary epoch to be spent amongst little girls who smelt of buttermilk-soap and who were stupid despite an imitative dexterity with figures and grammar.

Presently she began to nod to the soothing accompaniment of rumbling wheels and the even clip-clop of the horse's hoofs. In this manner she passed the tall ranks of houses built when Weymouth was patronized by Royalty, and did not wake until the van bumped across the stretch of waste land on the outskirts of the town. Mounds of shingle hid the sea and lay in an uneven layer over the road, half burying a handful of tumbledown cottages so that they seemed to be floating on billows of pebbles. There was a smell of seaweed, nets, and the guts of fish; a dog on a clanking chain howled at the rising moon. As they gained the level road they were met by cold, acrid vapour arising from the marsh. Victoria shivered and huddled into the back of the cart, to recoil upon coming in contact with a carcass of pork suspended from the roof.

The clammy mist made everything look illusive and unreal; patches of the road disappeared altogether, and the lamps, instead of being supported on stout iron posts, seemed to be floating in space like golden balloons. Vapour lay in a thick wedge over the marsh, cutting the surrounding hills in half, so that only the summits showed darkly silhouetted against the sky. Emerging from one of these obliterating patches, when the van seemed the only tangible substance in a nebulous universe, Victoria was surprised to see her grandfather ahead walking briskly in the same direction. He hailed the van as it drew alongside and climbed in.

"It's a raw night," he affably remarked to the driver.

"Aye."

"Could you do with some baccy?"

"Aye."

"It's good Navy plug and'll keep the damp out."

"Aye."

"My theory that an ideal language should consist of a negative and an affirmative has been improved upon by Duchar. I wish your Aunt Sophy would follow his example without modelling herself upon Verena, whose silence is more provocative than speech."

Victoria murmured a response which might have meant anything.

"Men of experience like myself make allowances for feminine shortcomings and take precautionary measures." Admiral Tresidder, unusually complacent, was so pleased with his observation that he repeated the last words. "And take precautionary measures. That's what I've been doing this afternoon. In future my business letters will be addressed to the post office to avoid another hullabaloo. Now you're going to school every day you are to be your grandfather's little postwoman." He gave her a congratulatory pat on the shoulder.

Instead of feeling pride in the trust, Victoria saw herself acting as an uneasy agent in a variety of nefarious deceptions, misgivings lost upon her grandfather who, as chief conspirator, was enjoying an exhilaration denied to deputies.

"I'll get you a little wallet to wear under your frock," he continued cheerfully. "Duchar, for a small consideration, will bring you past the post office on your way home. You can nip out and collect anything there is to hand. Be very careful of envelopes marked 'Nosob Dia-

mond Mines' and 'The Crumpsall Calico Combine.' "

By this time the carrier's cart had creaked its way in and out of the mist and arrived at the base of Furzy Cliff, where the gate of Tarbubbles joined the road as it turned inland.

"You run in to your Aunt Sophy, who'll be expecting you," said Admiral Tresidder benignly. "I shall go in the back way, as my boots are muddy."

VII

CATKINS were hanging in velvet clusters and a soft green sheen covered the black hedges round the marsh when the news of Lionel Tresidder's death came to Tarbubbles. It broke upon the family when they were more than usually preoccupied with themselves, and created as much impression upon the ferment of their lives as a pebble cast into a choppy sea. Victoria, enduring the last tedious days of quarantine after measles, received the news of her father's death from Miss Tresidder, who had detached herself from more pressing anxieties in order to break the tidings in a fitting manner. Attired in a cotton overall and her hair protected from infection by a knotted handkerchief, she was prepared to be kind: precautions rendered unnecessary by Victoria's disinclination to be comforted by antiseptic embraces. Her manner repelled sympathy, and transformed Miss Tresidder's compassion into indignation.

"I don't understand you, Victoria. You're as hard as steel: the more one expects you to display feeling the more callous you become. Had I lost my father when I was a little girl, I should have cried as if my heart were breaking."

"What use would it have been?"

"None at all, but I never considered the possible advantages of my actions as you do. I merely follow the dictates of my heart." Miss Tresidder's tone was scathing.

"But he didn't die."

"That's not the point. Had he been killed by a Chinaman as your father has been, I should have cried myself faint and prayed to the Almighty to punish his murderer."

"Which might irritate God. You would be angry if I asked you to have the drawing-room carpet taken up to-morrow when you planned to do it on Thursday week."

"You are getting too big a girl to yoke trivial earthly happenings with Sublime Government. Your manner of speaking is almost blasphemous."

"I'm only trying to explain that the Chinaman is of the same importance to God as the drawing-room is to you."

"I tremble for your future. Obviously you don't need us; you make it clear that we are of no consequence at all. And enough troubles occur in this house to influence the average person, what with your father murdered, Verena making a retreat at the convent where she'll not get enough to eat, and your grandfather speculating in fraudulent concerns! And you haven't the grace to be sorry for your share in that business."

"Yes, I am; but when one is little one is often ashamed of the things grown-ups make one do."

"That's not a proper way to speak of your elders."

"It's true."

Left alone, Victoria lay face downwards on the bed with her feet on the pillow and her head against the iron rails at the foot. Now it had happened she realized that her father's death came as no surprise to some wiser part of her mind. Looking back through her memory, she saw him as a gracious visitor with no proper place in the world or in the lives of those who lived in it. As some one to whom death signified homecoming after a mystifying

sojourn among strangers whose ways he had never learnt, whose feverish desires he had never felt. Victoria, lying flat on her stomach, thought sadly of his going, regretfully, as one thinks of a homing swallow flying off to seek the sun.

§

The Tresidders atoned for the moderation of their grief by the depths of their outward mourning. Sophy dressed herself in a dull black material of the wiry texture of horsehair; Verena returned from the convent in draperies of nun-like austerity; the Admiral wore a stiff black satin tie and mourning arm-band. Mrs. Tresidder displayed such a profusion of crêpe, floating veils and white lisse that her husband remarked: "She couldn't do more if she were a widow."

Ashamed at their lack of sorrow, they encouraged each other in reminiscences of the dead, only to find that the boy they recalled gave little clue to the character of the man they had never known.

"Do you remember Lionel rescuing worms from the footpath and putting them into the grass for safety?" Verena asked in a soft voice.

"He disliked things that crawled. I recollect he turned green when they writhed between his fingers." Thus Sophy, sighing, but with effort.

"He said he was learning courage," supplemented Verena.

Mrs. Tresidder added her quota to the appreciations: "He must have had a noble nature—Peace be upon him!"

"How thin he was as a cadet—just like a tadpole!" Admiral Tresidder had forgotten that detrimental memories should be buried deep as the corpse.

"I don't know how you can, father! Lionel was

always good-looking and most particular about his appearance." Sophy spoke rebukingly.

"I remember the bills he ran up at Gieve's when he was at Greenwich—extravagant young beggar!"

"Poor Lionel!" Sophy heaved another deep sigh.

"It's awful to think we shall never see him again!" lamented Verena.

"He was a cheery youngster," Admiral Tresidder observed without thought, and then paused recollecting that his son had not been especially merry, that time had dimmed their scanty meetings. Memories of his boy were interwoven with memories of other men's sons, and with indiscretions of young lieutenants viewed with indulgent eyes from the isolation of the stern-walk. As if to defy misgiving, he added with definite assurance: "He was so keen to be doing things, always on the *qui vive*."

"He liked thinking," said Victoria with the conviction born of intimacy. "He didn't trouble about money and food and people—he thought of the things you feel but can't see."

"Those would be funny things to think about," said her grandfather, pinching her cheek indulgently.

§

In June the Admiral's financial activities took a sudden turn for the better: the mines in Africa disgorged diamonds at an unprecedented rate. Sophy, making no further references to Victoria's part in the enterprise, bought new curtains for the drawing-room, and raised no objection when the Admiral announced his intention of inviting his financial colleague, Mr. Guttenburg, to Tarbubbles.

Victoria returned from school one sultry afternoon to

find a big cream motor-car, like a coracle on wheels, standing before the front door. Leather coats, pillows, and fur-lined rugs lay about the hall; a valet with a sickly pale face and a deprecating manner was carrying expensive suit-cases upstairs from the pile stacked at the bottom.

Mr. Guttenburg, seated on one of the bow-legged drawing-room chairs, was the central figure in a circle radiating urbanity. Even Verena, secularly detached by the intensity of her religion, was drawn into the magic ring.

"My little granddaughter," said Admiral Tresidder, thrusting Victoria towards the financier. Her hand was engulfed in a moist soft grasp. She found herself staring into bright black eyes almost hidden by puffy, drooping lids.

"Pleathd to meet you," lisped a small silky voice, incongruous in so big a man. An ingratiating smile displayed brilliant teeth lavishly repaired with gold.

"Her father was killed the other day in that horrible riot at Shanghai," Miss Tresidder explained in a whisper.

Mr. Guttenburg responded agreeably: "Oh, poor fellow!"

"Never trust a Chink!" was the Admiral's sententious warning.

"I never trutht anybody!" The financier beamed blandly upon the company.

"I'm sure you don't expect us to believe that!" Mrs. Tresidder was arch.

"No, never exthpect any one to take me at my word," he answered, with another disarming glimpse of teeth.

His cloth-topped boots were set closely together, his fleshy thighs tightly encased in striped morning trousers spread womanishly over the chair—an attitude suggesting

whalebones and busks. His black coat fitted without a crease; a tie of best Spitalfields silk disappeared beneath the discreet V of a pearl-grey waistcoat. His air was at once demure and ingenuous, belied somewhat by his square jowl, blue with a beard under the skin.

"I believe everybody." Verena cast a candid look at the visitor.

"How thweet—I'll tell you all my thecrets."

"I'd love to hear them," she replied earnestly.

"I don't think you'd understand Mr. Guttenburg's confidences," said the Admiral indulgently.

"The wouldn't, but I'll tell her all the thame."

"Don't you credit women with intelligence?" pouted Verena.

"Inthtinct, dear lady, ith your thpethial gift, intelligenth ith the clumthy counterweapon of our thex."

"I believe in the Franchise and equal rights for women," she retorted after the manner of one repeating the Creed.

Miss Tresidder firmly interposed. "Don't take her seriously, Mr. Guttenburg, she's just being perverse."

"Jutht the thweet waywardneth of your thex. I capitulate. Women have charm, inthinct *and* intelligenth." He bowed with great deference to Verena, bending stiffly from his hips like a sawdust doll.

§

The family saw more of Dorset in the succeeding days than in the whole of their ten years' residence at Tarbubbles. The cream Rolls-Royce, chuffing along with an effect of speed much in excess of reality, was to be met with as far afield as Bournemouth. Mr. Guttenburg, in a check cap, goggles, and a fawn-coloured coat fastened with photographic buttons of motor-cars, clutched the

driving wheel with tense hands. Mrs. Tresidder sat beside him, protected by a dust-coat and quantities of chiffon veiling. Sophy, Verena and the Admiral were wedged in the back seat in company with a picnic basket and a patent refrigerator for champagne.

At first the outings were much sought after, but enthusiasm lessened as the novelty wore off and breakdowns became more frequent. In the end Mrs. Tresidder and Mr. Guttenburg sallied forth unaccompanied, the basket and the refrigerator occupying the vacant seat behind.

"You ought to go with them," Sophy said to her father.

"No, thank you, my dear; I've bumped up and down over that infernal axle long enough."

"One must be prepared to put up with a great deal for visitors."

"Miriam is doing everything necessary in the cause of hospitality. And she enjoys riding in the abominable machine."

"Exactly why I thought it wise to warn you."

"I don't like innuendoes, Sophy."

"It's a difficult position for me to be placed in—but if you won't see, it is no concern of mine. At least I feel I have done my duty and can wash my hands of the business with a clear conscience." She flounced indoors, leaving the Admiral and Victoria to finish their tea alone.

The table was standing on the lawn in front of the house. A gap in the trees showed a glimpse of sea and a yacht tacking with a bright red sail, like a gaudy butterfly fluttering in the sun.

"A storm's coming up," said the Admiral, casting an experienced glance at the sky.

"I hope it'll come before tomorrow's regatta."

"It may blow over—it's a south-easterly wind."

"Mr. Dibb is sailing his yawl in the second race."

"Is he the father of the precocious child who tacked on to us at the flower show?"

"Yes, he keeps Dibb's Stores, where Aunt Sophy buys groceries."

"I don't know to what the country's coming. When I was a boy, persons of Dibb's class knew their place and were proud to remain within it. They gave their daughters a couple of woollen gowns and a length of print and sent them to service with gentry, instead of dressing them in magenta satin to ape ladies."

"Gladys is going to Holloway College."

"The lower orders have been getting above themselves ever since the Queen died. One can't expect social barriers to be preserved when the monarch consorts with trade."

"I don't see that occupation makes any difference to character. A draper ought to be as likeable as a Duke," Victoria argued reasonably.

"They ought to be, but they're not," said her grandfather with great decision.

§

The storm predicted broke over Tarbubbles at eight o'clock and found the family waiting for dinner timed for seven.

"Cook says the entrée is ruined," announced Sophy, returning from a visit to the kitchen.

"Telegraph offices close at six," said the Admiral.

"I always said we ought to have a 'phone," Verena languidly intervened.

"If we had, what use would it be to Miriam and

Guttenburg? Not one village in twenty has a telephone, and the car may have broken down miles from anywhere."

"Can't we have our dinner and keep theirs hot in chafing dishes?"

"We can, but it's not polite," returned Sophy. "It doesn't look well for the family to eat the best portions and leave *menavellings* for the guest. But if Mr. Guttenburg were told you had been fasting since yesterday he might excuse it. You've lost all your looks since you changed your faith. Soon you'll be taken for the elder sister."

This taunt produced a startled expression. Verena sat upright and furtively examined her face in the mirror over the mantelshelf.

"Yesterday was an act of mortification for Reverend Mother's spiritual bouquet."

"A pity she doesn't starve herself, instead of expecting it of others."

"Occasional abstinence does no harm—many eminent physicians advocate a weekly fast," said Admiral Tresidder impartially.

"Doctors prescribe in accordance with the needs of the body, these ignorant women inaugurate penances regardless of consequences. If they kill Verena it will doubtless be counted as a pious sacrifice, and it won't take long if she continues to lose weight as she's doing." Miss Tresidder spoke with perverse satisfaction.

"You should be charitable to your neighbours, Sophy," her father mildly observed.

"The nuns are no neighbours of mine!"

"Nobody considers how painful these harangues are to me. I mortify my body for the good of my soul. If I look pale and worn, it doesn't harm anybody but myself."

"Don't imagine you can throw dust in my eyes, Verena; I've known you too long. You're starving for effect, and to place us at a disadvantage. You know if you become ill you'll occupy the centre of the stage as an unfortunate martyr, and we shall blame ourselves. You can't deceive me!" Sophy took out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

"You're cruel and unsisterly—a disappointed, soured old maid! I wish I were dead!" Verena subsided, sobbing against a cushion.

"Dear, dear!" said Admiral Tresidder, looking helplessly across at Victoria, who watched the scene with startled eyes.

Insistent tapping on the door was followed by the parlourmaid's embarrassed: "Please, miss, cook says dinner will be ruined if it's kept another minute."

"Tell her to send it in," Sophy gulped from the sheltering folds of her handkerchief.

"I can't eat anything—I want to die!" sobbed Verena.

Sophy walked majestically to the door. "Nothing for me—I'm going to my room."

"Victoria and I will dine," said the Admiral.

VIII

MRS. TRESIDDER and Mr. Guttenburg returned the next morning in time for lunch. They covered their entry with noisy explanations which made it appear that their failure to communicate was entirely due to the inaccessibility of Tarbubbles.

"I wished to install a telephone ages ago, but none of you wanted it. I said at the inn last night, 'If there was a 'phone at Tarbubbles, we could let them know what has happened and where we are.' Didn't I, Mr. Guttenburg?"

"Yeth, and I thaid, 'Thith kind of thing couldn't occur in America, where every houth hath one.' "

Miss Tresidder suspiciously interposed: "Have they a telephone at 'The Spotted Cow'?"

"Not exactly on the premises, but they said the doctor would allow us to use his."

"At least you might have telegraphed this morning," said the Admiral accusingly.

"We thought of it, but came to the conclusion we should arrive as quickly. Tarbubbles is so remote, and the messenger boys always loiter."

"We've endured a dreadful night picturing you both dead in a ditch."

"Tho thorry, but what could we do? Automobilth are tricky thingth; if the engine refutheth to chuff, well it doth, and one thitth on the roadthide until a horth cometh along."

Mr. Guttenburg regarded the company with disarming amiability.

The Admiral spoke dourly: "I used to think I should like a car, but I have now changed my mind."

"I believe in being progrethive, even if it ith uncomfortable."

"There is no accounting for tastes."

The hospitable prestige of Tarbubbles was preserved by the timely arrival of the brougham which was to take the Admiral, Miss Tresidder and Victoria to Weymouth.

Verena had not been seen since the previous evening and was supposedly at the convent where she spent so much of her time. Since her conversion to the Church of Rome, her comings and goings had become of less and less concern to Sophy Tresidder, who had previously shown exaggerated solicitude. Their relations were marked by sorrowful displeasure on the part of the elder sister and disdain by the younger.

"If you feel inclined to come to the regatta, as we originally planned, we can abandon the brougham in favour of Mr. Guttenburg's car." Sophy spoke with social duplicity.

"Don't consider us, go off and enjoy yourselves," Mrs. Tresidder responded heartily.

Mr. Guttenburg helped himself liberally to Burgundy, an oily look of satisfaction on his face. "Don't thpoil your pleathure by giving uth a thought." He added magnanimously: "We don't detherve conthideration. Have a good time watching the boath rathing; we'll thit in the garden and meditate upon our thinth." He plunged his hand into his pocket and produced a half-

sovereign. " 'Toria mutht have a tip to back the winner with."

It was warm with the heat of Mr. Guttenburg's body. Victoria distastefully accepted the gift.

Miss Tresidder's voice ill-concealed her annoyance: "It's too much, Mr. Guttenburg, sixpence or a shilling would be sufficient."

"Far too liberal—two shillings or half a crown is quite enough for a little girl." Such unanimity of opinion was unusual between Sophy and the Admiral.

"None of your *schnecks*, Victoria knows how to spend her *gelt* as well as any of us. Come, Vic, and see if I haven't a *metsiah* for you." Mrs. Tresidder rummaged in her purse and produced eight-and-sixpence in silver. "There, buy some chocolates, good ones, not less than three-and-six a pound."

The dining-room door closed upon the sunlit room, the littered table, the complacently smiling occupants. Admiral Tresidder, Sophy and Victoria crossed the hall in embarrassed silence—the brougham looked dull and dilapidated beside the glittering Rolls-Royce drawn up at the door. Skirting the motor-car they climbed into the creaking carriage, smelling familiarly of harness, mildew, and stables.

Miss Tresidder heaved a sigh of relief. "Half a pound of two shilling chocolates, seventeen-and-six in your money box," she pronounced adamantly.

"Gifts in cash place one at a disadvantage," Admiral Tresidder said uncomfortably.

"Such bad taste!" added Aunt Sophy.

§

Pertinaciously Gladys Dibb cultivated a friendship with Victoria, who as a consequence found herself ostracized by the little girls at Miss Carver's. She revenged herself by ironic repartee productive of tearful consequences.

"I don't believe you love me!" Gladys whimpered. "Ma says she doesn't approve of the way you treat me, and if things go on as they are she'll go and give your Aunt Sophy a piece of her mind."

The prospect of being embroiled in yet another Olympian war appalled Victoria and prompted her to parley.

"What is it I'm supposed to have done to you?"

"It's not *what* you do, it's the *way* you do it," complained Gladys. "One 'ud think I was dirt the way you speak to me, and Ma says it's an ill reward for the devotion I lavish upon you."

"But I never asked for devotion—you can't expect people to be grateful for what they don't want."

"Ma says you're a conceited little girl, and of the same spittle as the rest of your family."

"Then why bother about us?"

Instead of answering, Gladys extemporized: "I have an affectionate disposition, but because I am lovable Ma says you needn't imagine she will allow you to ride rough-shod over me. And she says any Dibb would be ashamed to make eyes at strange men on the promenade as Verena Tresidder does. No real lady demeans herself by speaking to a gentleman without an introduction."

Gladys cast down her reddened lids in a very superior manner. She looked moist, common and not over-clean.

Victoria struggled against a feeling of impatience—Gladys should realize that the Dibbs and their opinions

didn't signify one way or the other. She turned a contemptuous back and looked out through the schoolroom window at the holiday-makers sauntering up and down the esplanade. Fat mothers perspiring in black cloth dresses, fathers wearing yachting caps and brown canvas shoes with tweed suits, hatless sons and daughters in white clothes that had to outlast the holiday.

As she watched she saw Verena emerge from the crowd, accompanied by a hatless lanky youth wearing lemon-coloured gloves, a blue blazer embellished with crossed rackets, and baggy white trousers. She heard Gladys's excited breathing. "Didn't I tell you—and she only picked up with him yesterday! I call such goings on disgusting!"

"Nobody cares what you call them, and you're mistaken. He's a family friend."

"What's his name?" demanded Gladys suspiciously.

"It's slipped my memory for the moment."

"Yar—story-teller! Suppose you're next going to tell me he's a Lootenant in the Navy?"

"No, I shan't say that. He's a collector—a collector of taxes."

"What kind of taxes?"

"Plain ones," said Victoria firmly.

Gladys eyed her doubtingly: "I believe you're telling lies."

"Believe what you please."

Victoria's arrogant bearing overawed Miss Dibb. Discomfited, she sat down on the end of a bench, wondering if her disclosures had increased her importance as she had intended.

Meanwhile Victoria considered the disagreeable impression left upon her mind, without thinking of Gladys

save as an impertinent intruder who obliged her to save the family reputation at the cost of self-respect. Why, she wondered, did grown-ups so willingly substitute the second best for perfection, and break the rules which they themselves had instituted? That Verena should make friends with strangers did not in itself strike her as peculiar. She reasoned that the nice people that you didn't know were more numerous than the ones you did—it was sensible to equalize the disparity. But Verena's companion didn't come into this category; he belonged to the vague concourse of Dibbses who made a smudgy human background which rarely separated into individuals. Instead of being singled out for friendship, he should have remained an unimportant unit in the crowds surging over the promenade. This circumstance shocked her more profoundly than the flouting of convention, which held no significance. The lanky youth, happy in ill-fitting flannels, was an unwitting makeshift to substantiate the particular form of self-deception which made life supportable to Verena.

There was something sad in the willing acceptance of inferior symbols to represent an ideal, even an ideal so pinchbeck as Verena's.

§

Peace enveloped Tarbubbles. Each member of the household pursued diverse ambitions with a concentration that prevented the usual intermeddling.

Admiral Tresidder's financial activities had greatly increased with Mr. Guttenburg's departure. Stabilized ventures were carried on from the house; enterprises of a "chancy" description were still maintained through the medium of Victoria and the Post Restante.

Miss Tresidder's anxieties were lulled by the continued prosperity of "Nosob Diamond Mines." A birthday present of shares in a blancmange factory paying 25 per cent from the Vauxhall Bridge Road completed her moral anæsthesia, and rewarded her father with an exhilarating freedom. Out of her first dividend she purchased heavy Nottingham lace curtains, dressed the drawing-room chairs in flowered chintz, and covered the cushions in beribboned muslin which gave them the intimate look of lingerie. A quest of the beautiful which engrossed her to the exclusion of outside happenings.

The hot weather that ushered in July seemed to rob Mrs. Tresidder of her usual buoyancy. Assurance based upon physical charms deserted her, an air at once deprecative and indecisive replaced it, and contrasted strangely with her deep bosom and sensual mouth. She drooped like a flaming peony too heavy for its stalk. Day after day she trailed up the Coastguard path to the hollow at the top of the cliff, where for hours she would make an immobile splash of colour against the burnt grass. It became the custom for Victoria to warn her of approaching meals; together they would dawdle in the hot sunshine, watching the streak of white road leading to Weymouth.

"Do you ever think of the dead women who once walked that road and wonder if they tried by acts of self-denial to appease a jealous Jehovah? And did they find that a *mitzvah* buys nothing, that the sun shines on good and evil alike?"

"People are as good as they can be," said Victoria.

"I never thought about virtue before. I did what pleased me, and was more comfortable."

"There's no use pretending to be what you're not—it's

like icing a piece of bread, then calling it cake. God knows quite well what's under the sugar."

"Then perhaps it's better for me to pursue my inclination—we can't all follow the Law of Moses. In any case it is probably my stomach and not my soul that is causing trouble. My father—Peace be upon him!—always said, 'Blame your digestion before you question your luck.' "

"Do you think the black speck close to the toll-house can be Verena?" Victoria asked, hoping to deflect Mrs. Tresidder's thoughts from embarrassing subjects.

"It may be—or the crazy boy from Preston—they both swing their arms."

"Verena only does it when she's excited."

"She's always in a ferment. Eventually something will happen, but I shan't be here to see."

"Do you feel you're going to die?" Victoria anxiously inquired.

"No, it's only my *schnecks*." Playfully she pulled Victoria down beside her and enfolded her in a soft scented embrace. Victoria endured the caress, and even managed to return the kiss which had left a scarlet imprint upon her cheek. "You're a funny little thing, illusive as an elf! Some day you'll become human—when a *chosan* comes to take you from Tarbubbles."

"I like Tarbubbles."

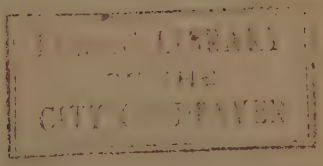
"You'll like a bridegroom better!" A sly look of knowledge came down over her face like a mask, and was at once reminiscent of Salvina talking of Sheila Doran in the dining-room of the house on the Via Marina, and of Gladys Dibb when she spoke of babies. All three episodes belonged to each other, and some day would fit together like parts of a puzzle. Abruptly Vic-

toria stood up, anxious to terminate a conversation which had so many uncomfortable turnings.

"It is Verena!" she announced with relief. "Now we can go down and have our tea."

"Yes, one must eat. It is most important to have nourishing food and regular meals."

Mrs. Tresidder's voice sounded preoccupied, as if offering a dutiful reminder. She got up with unusual awkwardness, but regained her graceful poise as she descended the cliff. A gust of wind caught the rose-coloured draperies of her skirt. They billowed about her like the sails of a full-rigged ship.



IX

DURING the holidays Victoria was allowed to bathe from the secluded beaches on condition that Polly Anker accompanied her. Polly was a precaution against the many unpleasant things which may happen on beaches, rather than a safeguard against drowning—a contingency not overlooked by Miss Tresidder, who had provided two inflated hot-water bottles and some tape.

Polly took her responsibilities lightly. By maintaining a sleepy vigil from the top of the cliffs she considered she fulfilled her duty; a conception of the task which left Victoria free to dabble for as long as she pleased in the shallows between the rocks. These lonely summer days taught Victoria the healing properties of solitude. Sun and sea, and the feeling of space, dissolved the disquieting miasma generated by other people's minds, which clung about her like a fog.

In the pleasure of watching gulls and curlews, whose singleness of purpose reduced existence to a delightfully simple problem, she could review from a different angle the conflicting emotions which made life so difficult at Tarbubbles. Even the sea-anemones speckling the rocks at low tide with blobs of red jelly appeared to have a faculty for enjoyment unknown to more advanced organisms. Tentatively she poked one with a stick and watched its instantaneous contraction. Perhaps her conclusion had been hasty. They also might have their reactions.

Polly Anker's temper depended upon the distance her

feet traversed and the condition of a troublesome bunion. Consequently she was more amiable when she set out in the morning than when she returned in the evening. It was unfortunate that the day Mrs. Tresidder eloped from Tarbubbles should coincide with a visit to the farthermost beach, and the additional weight of an extra bottle of tea to the picnic basket.

Polly's face was wet and shining with sweat as she struggled down the boulder-strewn path which ended opposite the gate of Tarbubbles. Clouds of dust, disturbed by her awkward descent, settled in a grey film round the hem of her long piqué skirt and covered Victoria's black shoes and stockings with gritty particles.

Polly stopped suddenly, and almost tripped Victoria following closely. "Look!" she cried excitedly. "There's your grandfather trying to mount Gardener's bicycle, and your aunties propping him on either side." Curiosity and temper vied with each other for supremacy. She frowned heavily, but watched the group at the gate with eager speculation. "There! He's pinched his thumb in the brake and is hopping on one foot. Lawks!" She gave a hitch to her load and started down the hill.

As her descent cost her the view of Tarbubbles, Victoria called from her point of vantage: "He's got on, and is turning the corner!"

"He'll kill himself for sure!"

Victoria was too wise to pursue what was obviously a vexatious topic, so they stumped down in silence, and reached the gate as Sophy and Verena turned towards the house.

"Is the master trying to commit suicide?" Polly inquired with heavy sarcasm.

"Something awful has happened, Nanny—you can't

guess how awful!" Verena made the ominous pronouncement with chastened relish. "I always had a premonition that something dreadful would happen, but didn't say anything about it because you all doubt my psychic gift. I felt it, and now it has come."

Polly had recourse to brisk nursery discipline: "Don't encourage yourself to be silly, Verena! Say at once what's the matter, like a good girl."

"It will be best for me to describe what has occurred," said Sophy, "and it will prevent the hasty conclusions liable to confuse actualities. You remember Mrs. Tresidder complained of a little malaise last night, and requested to be left undisturbed until late this morning? I went to call her at twelve with a cup of barley water and found the room empty and bare. Burnt papers were in the grate, a letter addressed to the Admiral was on the washstand, weighed down with his spare set of false teeth. The pincushion was available, but characteristically she went out of her way to find an indecorous paper-weight."

Verena made a deprecatory gesture. "So like Miriam!"

"But it doesn't end there. She's not gone alone—she's joining a man."

"Which?" laconically from Polly.

"That horrid Jew, Guttenburg." Verena shuddered.

"The saying is that 'like goes to like,'" observed Polly with the satisfaction of one who sees words of wisdom fulfilled.

"Fancy leaving Daddy for him!" Verena interjected with an exaggerated air of childish wonder.

"There are some I could name who would run after a heathen Chinee!" Polly retorted acrimoniously.

Verena flushed scarlet. "I hope you're not referring

to the attentions Doctor Toon paid me last winter?"

"Attentions are as may be, but if the cap fits, as the saying goes, them as wants can wear it!"

Polly flounced into the house. Victoria reflected that it was a pity they had walked so far, that Sunday boots were so tight on weekdays, and that economy had persuaded Polly to carry home a pint of unused tea.

They straggled into the dining-room. Victoria sat down to her supper, spread on a tray at the end of the table. Already Tarbubbles wore the hurt look of a house abandoned for something better. In a manner unsuspected by the aunts the room brooded sullenly upon the slight.

"Why did Granddaddy try to ride a bicycle?"

"Your grandfather had to get to the post office in order to send telegrams. Coachman and gardener are at the P.S.A. fête at Upwey, so of course he had to go himself and as quickly as possible."

"Such a pity we have no telephone!" lamented Verena.

And Sophy rejoined: "Miriam was so averse to the idea."

Victoria meditated upon the agile somersaults practised unconsciously by mature minds.

"I wonder how Miriam got her luggage away?" Verena pondered aloud.

"The carrier—Duchar would do anything for a tip."

"Perhaps the new parlourmaid helped."

"Quite likely—but she'll have to go in any case. We shan't have the money to keep four maids."

"Why not?"

"Miriam paid a lot of extras. She always met discrepancies between expenditure and income. Since father took up finance he has let a lot of things slide. She

practically kept the place going last year—of course I never let her know that I knew—it wouldn't have done."

"No, it wouldn't have done," said Verena.

§

The sun had given Polly Anker a bilious attack. Solaced by Dr. Jowett's Sermons, she had gone to lie on her bed. Nobody remembered Victoria. When she had eaten her supper she sat on the window-seat in the hall and watched for her grandfather's return. He came back just before eight, pushing the bicycle, which had the handle-bar broken. In addition to his clothes having a tumbled appearance, he had a cut over his eye, and a trickle of blood down the side of his face had dyed part of his beard—dilapidations which intensified his crest-fallen appearance.

Miss Tresidder and Verena came into the hall to meet him.

"Poor Daddy!" said Verena, putting her arms round his neck.

"You've fallen off the bicycle and cut yourself!" announced Sophy. "I'll get some iodine, hot water and lint." She bustled off capably.

Admiral Tresidder sank down on the edge of the high fender. His cheerful, pompous bearing had deserted him, he looked old and vanquished. Even his gardening boots, picked up in the haste of departure, sympathetically reflected his general air of defeat.

Verena curled up beside him, and rubbed her face up and down on the sleeve of his coat. With the indulgent gesture of old age he patted her hair absently. Presently Verena began to fidget. She looked at the clock.

"Don't you want any dinner?" she asked, unable to curb impatience.

"No, dear—you get yours, I'm not hungry."

"But you must be after such an awful day. I'm famished."

"You're young," he answered mildly.

"You're bigger, Daddy. Ever so much bigger!"

"One needs less when one is old. That is the Almighty's most merciful dispensation."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Inappetence."

"I don't like conundrums, Daddy." She pouted, got off the fender petulantly, and looked surprised that he did not notice.

Sophy returned, armed with a basin, a towel and a sponge. She began to dab the cut. A trickle of water zigzagged down his neck. He wriggled uncomfortably.

"It must be washed—you never know what poison may get into an open wound. A sister of cook's died from a scratch by a rusty nail."

He submitted unhappily.

"We must take a pull on ourselves, and not allow things to overcome us," she advised with brusque common sense.

He stroked her hand humbly. "I will as soon as I can get used to it—you must give me time, Sophy."

"Yes, of course, dear. Verena and I quite understand how bad it is to bear—nobody could appreciate it better. But we must remember on no account to give way." She snipped off a square of lint. "By the exercise of self-control troubles can be overcome."

"Yes, that's what we must do, Daddy," echoed Verena in cheerful encouragement.

"Yes, dear," he answered meekly.

Sophy fixed the bandage and fastened it with a large safety-pin. He looked more battered and woebegone than before. She kissed him with a hint of patronage.

"You must remember, darling, that she wasn't worthy of you, or she never would have gone."

"I'm old, Sophy. It was a mistake. I wronged her by coveting her youth, by forgetting I had nothing to give in return."

"Nothing to give, indeed! She couldn't have entered Naval society without us. I'm sure we did our utmost to make things pleasant and not to let her feel the difference."

"You did your best."

"That is a great satisfaction, and will help us to a forgiving attitude of mind."

"I have nothing to forgive."

At dinner they tried to distract his thoughts by a gentle trickle of harmless conversation. With some obscure notion that the special mark of attention would have a comforting effect, Sophy ordered his soup to be served in a special porringer reserved for illness. Pathetically he spooned the soup out of the deep little bowl, tilting it sideways by the handle.

"Why do I have to drink my soup out of this?—you and Verena have ordinary plates."

Sophy answered soothingly: "We thought it would be nicer for you to have it in a basin to-night."

Accepting the evasion, he stirred his spoon absently round and round in the dregs, making a monotonous grating sound.

"Mrs. Macmullin is covering the settee and the two straight-backed chairs in the vicar's study with cretonne

bought with the profits from the poultry. I'm sure she got the idea from our new drawing-room covers."

"Little Savonarola is in knickers," contributed Verena.

"Yes, she made them out of the bits of cloth from the old billiard table in the lads' Club."

"It's a pity they have so many children and only one handkerchief between them."

"They have one each in church on Sundays," Miss Tresidder returned defensively.

"Of course I believe in celibacy for the priesthood."

"I know you do," snapped her sister.

Cold mutton followed the soup, then blancmange and stewed prunes. The Admiral refused the meat, but accepted pudding from the adamant Sophy.

"So unfortunate that it's cook's night out. Everything always happens at once."

§

The family were late for breakfast on the following morning. Victoria got down first and was surprised and gratified to find a fly-blown picture post card of the Temple of Theseus at Athens sent by Colin Dallas from Cape Town. He said his ship was beastly, his messmates awful blighters, and in his opinion Wagner was the greatest composer.

She stuffed it into the front of her frock as Verena came into the room. To display her post card would spoil the pleasure she had in receiving it.

"Have you been examining my letter?" her aunt asked suspiciously.

"I didn't know you had one."

"Then don't say anything about it." Verena picked up a common-looking envelope with an eccentrically

affixed stamp, and hid it within the pouch of her blouse.

"Daddy's got a lot of business letters, and actually there's one for Sophy from Miriam."

She went to the door and excitedly called: "Sophy, there's something thrilling waiting for you!"

Miss Tresidder descended the stairs with decorous haste. "I hope it's pleasant."

"I'm thrilled!" returned Verena ecstatically.

Miss Tresidder produced the mother-o'-pearl knife from her hand-bag and methodically slit the envelope in readiness for the making of spills or memorandums. She read down the first page.

"Miriam has the effrontery to send me a cheque for the servants' wages and the truck of coal ordered for the winter. She earmarks five pounds for a new coat and hat for Victoria. The woman has no decency."

"You can't expect fine feelings from a Jewess."

"Even natives preserve some decorum."

"Did she pay the servants in the usual way?"

"All except Polly. I contrived her out of the housekeeping money. It didn't seem nice for dear mother's maid to be paid by her successor. I dare say such scruples were foolish, but I suppose it's the way one's bred."

"What does Miriam write?" Verena demanded impatiently.

"She just says that her heart is torn both ways—which sounds silly under the circumstances. After referring to her grief at causing father unhappiness, she asks me to be sure that his underclothes are aired, as she read in the train that old people are apt to get bronchitis from damp garments. She instructs me to pay for the coal on delivery, and to give Susan an extra ten shillings for the trouble she took with the luggage and her cleverness over

Bradshaw. And adds she will be making arrangements with the bank to keep me supplied with money as she has plenty of *gelt* for everybody, and she wants father to keep his income for his speculations, which make such a nice amusement for him. Isn't it awful?"

"Frightful!"

They pondered upon the difficult problem.

Sophy said at last: "I think the proper course is to destroy the letter and ignore Miriam."

Verena agreed. "Then she won't know what to think —it will place her in a most awkward position."

Holding the obnoxious document at arm's length, Sophy tore it into minute pieces.

Verena brought the waste-paper basket.

X

INSTEAD of rousing himself, the Admiral became increasingly apathetic as the days passed. Unopened letters accumulated in a dusty pile on his writing-table; clandestine correspondence with outside brokers lay forgotten in the pigeon-holes of the post office.

After vying with each other in sympathetic attentions, Sophy and Verena became irritated that their ministrations were unavailing. He ought, they agreed, to take a pull on himself—to *do* something. Verena advocated gardening. He accepted the suggestion with the new docility which sat so strangely upon him. Presently they had the empty satisfaction of watching him fork the potato patch with the passionless obedience of an automaton.

"I can't think what we're going to do—he seems to have lost his enthusiasm. I've urged him not to give way, to exercise self-control. He agrees, but does nothing."

"He's had a shock, Sophy—his life has been blasted and laid waste; his heart has been trampled on and shattered. From experience I appreciate despair as you cannot do. Your lot has been tranquil, unharassed by the turmoil of passion."

Sophy glared at her indignantly. "Contending with a household of emotional spendthrifts is anything but tranquillizing."

"Poor Sophy!" said Verena, with galling patronage.

At the end of September Sophy discovered they were living on an overdraft from the Bank. She came into the

kitchen garden carrying an open letter received by the afternoon delivery, and looked across at Admiral Tresidder and Victoria uprooting beanstalks against the distant wall. She picked up her skirts and made two or three tentative efforts to cross the muddy potato patch without soiling her slippers. Failure acted like a match to her smouldering wrath. She called out angrily: "You might at least have the courtesy to come and ask what I want. You and Victoria are wearing thick boots, I am in thin kid slippers."

The Admiral put down his spade, and solicitously went towards her. "You should put on goloshes, dear. You might catch a chill."

"Rubbish—nobody'd concern themselves if I got pneumonia and died tonight!"

"On the contrary, my dear, we should be terribly upset. I don't know what would become of us without you."

"That's all you think about—your own comfort! You only consider me in connexion with yourselves, as a shield to take the brunt of any discomfort. Don't try to make me believe there is any regard for my feelings in the minds of the family, because I know better!"

The Admiral looked concerned. He stretched out his hand to pat her shoulder, but drew it back, recollecting it was covered with earth. "Have you got a headache? There's a little bottle of eau-de-Cologne in my drawer. You could dab it on—with a handkerchief."

"No, I haven't a headache, only a communication from the Bank."

She waved the letter before him. He eyed it apprehensively.

"Perhaps they've written to me as well. I'm afraid I haven't opened my letters for a long time."

"Probably. The manager says we have exhausted the

overdraft, and asks me what arrangements you propose making as he can elicit no reply from you."

"I can't make any arrangements—I can't make bricks without straw." He kicked a stone from the path with extreme irritation. They watched it bound along the ground and land with a loud ping in the cucumber frame. He looked sheepish. Sophy raised her eyebrows.

"I should like to know what has become of our balance. I have reduced expenditure one-third since Miriam left. There should be ample in the account."

"Tarbubbles costs a lot to keep up," the Admiral prevaricated.

"Our income is sufficient for living in the quiet way we do—we hardly ever entertain."

"One can't do much entertaining on a Vice-Admiral's pension!"

"Do you mean that our capital has gone?" she demanded incredulously.

"Not all. The Nosob Diamonds are paying, and one or two other investments, but in the main I have been unfortunate. Some Companies slumped and I didn't get out in time. There has been what one might describe as a steady drain upon capital for the last five years. However, I had a good run for my money." A gleam of satisfaction crossed his face and momentarily ousted his despondent expression.

"Didn't you consider the future?"

He answered with bluff assurance: "You'll be all right. You and Verena have each a hundred per annum. Two women together can live comfortably on such an income. You forget that my endeavour to make money was entirely for your benefit."

"When mother died we had a thousand a year in addition to your pension. We could have struggled along on it." The old man winced beneath the sarcasm.

"It was all meant for the best," he said humbly. "You shouldn't reproach me because luck was adverse. I couldn't feel worse about it than I do. Women never take a wide view of finance. They think in pounds, shillings and pence, instead of in lump sums. With a broader outlook the loss of a few thousands assumes its proper proportion. What seems a vast amount to me would be a mere bagatelle to Rockefeller. By such comparisons do men develop the sense of values. As the money has unfortunately gone we must make the best of it and meet failure boldly. We must look ahead, forget we ever had it, put our hands to the plough." Confidence returned with each friendly aphorism; the grisly spectre of defeated old age receded. He gave a sigh of relief and squared his shoulders.

Sophy surveyed him witheringly.

"On whom do you suppose the loss will fall heaviest?"

He made a desperate effort to retain his recovered aplomb, rapidly diminishing under his daughter's contemptuous gaze. Her eyes held the inscrutable antagonism of generations of women who listen to men without agreeing. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably.

"I shall bear the loss, and continue to maintain the house. You and Verena will keep your private incomes for personal use as before."

His voice fell sulkily upon his own ears—it held none of the bold magnanimity essential to the reconstruction of self-esteem. He prevented himself kicking another stone after the first—an action which had made him look

foolish. He thrust his hands deeply into his pockets and examined the toes of his boots with interest. The silence was becoming oppressive—it was charged with unspoken recriminations which jabbed his consciousness like well-aimed darts.

He cleared his throat noisily. "I intend to make over the Nosob shares to you unconditionally, as a token of my affection." After waiting vainly for an appreciative murmur of gratitude and capitulation, he raised his eyes to find that Sophy had disappeared.

He bent down and with his knife dislodged a large stone from the path. Taking careful aim he kicked it after the other—it fell, making a louder and more satisfying tinkle.

"That was the greenhouse!" Victoria quietly recorded.

"Damn!" said her grandfather.

§

Retrenchments of a drastic description were inaugurated by Sophy. At first Verena lent enthusiastic support, thereby fostering an erroneous belief in her sister's mind that "she was going to take things sensibly."

The coachman, the mare, and the brougham were the first luxuries to be sacrified; the parlourmaid and the "tweenie" followed swiftly. Sophy hesitated before dismissing the gardener. As a fruit and vegetable grower he was an economy. She spent some days balancing produce against wages, perquisites, patent manures and greenhouse coke. Her calculations had a perverse way of coming out differently each time, but maintained a sufficiently steady bias towards the debit side to convince her that the gardener must also be jettisoned.

The Admiral moved unhappily about the house and

garden during the reorganization. He felt himself an outcast, a traitor to the family, one who was judged and found wanting. He reflected that male despotism originated in fear rather than strength; it was an instinctive defence against the adamant female waiting for a sign of weakness to pounce and destroy. For several days he watched a war of attrition between a female spider and her mate staged in the corner of the potting-shed. Fat-bellied and powerful, she hung in the centre of her web ready for swift attacks upon her husband if he ventured from his refuge in the brickwork. With crumbs and drops of honey the Admiral strove unavailingly to succour the beleaguered. On the sixth day she got him. Disembowelled on a plant pot the pitiful bundle of wiry legs satirized man.

The catastrophe made a deep impression upon the Admiral and tinged his meditations upon the sexes with gloomy forebodings. Whichever way you looked at it you were ultimately defeated. Whilst retaining virility you could keep women in subjection, cozen yourself into a belief in your own invulnerability. Once age overtook you, such flimsy conceits showed themselves at their true value. Women had you at their mercy and pounced. When you were dead they washed you all over, tied your jaw with a grotesquely knotted bandage, balanced pennies on your eyelids.

He became morose, absented himself for long stretches, and ostentatiously refrained from asking questions. His antagonism became apparent to his daughters.

"Father's becoming very surly," Verena remarked.

"Just self-pity—he doesn't like being uncomfortable and appearing foolish." Sophy ran her duster over the piano keys in a cheerful ripple.

"You have a knack of making people look inferior."

"They don't need outside help to achieve that."

"You take so much on yourself—never consult any one. Dismissing the servants as you have done, then taking it for granted I'll do their work. This morning I found my bed wasn't made. I don't know if you think I'm going to do it, because I warn you I shan't turn the mattress whatever happens."

"Please yourself—I needn't remind you of the old adage."

"I can't imagine what's come over every one lately. Not so long ago you couldn't do enough for me. You bathed my head when it ached, and coaxed my appetite with tempting dishes. Now if I complain of neuralgia you tell me to apply menthol; when I want a hot drink you suggest dry toast."

"It's time you took a pull on yourself. I've got all I can do trying to save money."

"Then don't expect me to advance your avaricious schemes. I won't be turned into a servant. Tarbubbles can't be run with two maids, and one of them Polly, who is completely spoilt."

"You must do your share."

"I don't see the necessity, and I won't!"

A revival of Verena's religious fervour coincided with the final reduction of staff. Once more she attended early Mass, left the house at sunrise and returned at all kinds of odd and inconvenient hours.

For some mornings Miss Tresidder and Polly left her bed unmade, a stratagem defeated by Verena, who tumbled back into it at night with no more elaborate preparation than the tossing back of bedclothes from the footrail.

Polly inspected the room with disgust: "If a scullery-

maid left her attic like this, I should say she came from a low house."

"We cannot allow it to continue—there's a pool where the slop-pail has overflowed. Besides discolouring the carpet it's stained the pantry ceiling. As for the mattress, it's like a hammock!"

"If we tidy up we'll have to go on." Polly ran her fingers over the mirror, leaving a bright track in the dust, then she pointed at the coloured statue of the Virgin Mary, standing in a gilt niche: "Even the image in the corner has a sooty nose!"

"The flowers on the shrine are smelling."

"Like a graveyard!"

§

The news of the retrenchments at Tarbubbles spread like a flame through Weymouth and caused much excited speculation. Mrs. Dibb, who had severed active connexion with the Stores in St. Thomas's Street, returned to the tea and coffee counter on Friday morning with the specific intention of eliciting first-hand information from the envoy from Tarbubbles, a manœuvre frustrated by Miss Tresidder, who gave the weekly order.

"Reduced to a quarter, and everything on the list second-grade!" Mrs. Dibb confided to an assistant.

When Victoria returned to Miss Carver's at the end of the summer holidays, she found Gladys waiting near the clock-tower.

"Thought you mightn't be coming back!" Miss Dibb yelled through the hood of the carrier's van.

"Indeed!" Victoria shouted back.

"You're poor now, aren't you?"

"If you wish to talk, I had better get down. Kindly

pull up, Duchar." Victoria descended with dignity, and slung her school satchel over her shoulder. She turned to the driver: "Please call for me promptly."

"You might be ordering your coachman instead of the tupenny carrier!" scoffed Gladys.

"Both belong to the same class."

"You can't afford to be so stuck up without anything behind you. Poverty knocks the stuffing out of pride. I shall do the lardy-da now, 'cos we've got money and you've lost it. How do you like Danish butter after Dorset?"

Victoria quoted her Aunt Sophy: "It has a savour of its own."

"Chemicals!" said Gladys cryptically.

"Possibly," conceded Victoria.

"I've got a new brooch, the Stars and Stripes done in rubies and diamonds. My Ma's brother, Silas D. Grumper of Chicago, sent it. He's director of a Department Store. Next summer he's coming over to visit Ma and Pa—he has an automobile and a nigger to drive it."

"Really?"

"Yes. Uncle Silas is a slap-up swell. Not like these miserable N.O.'s who live here, pretending to be somebodies on nothing. Eating collar bacon and Danish butter. Huh!"

Gladys opened the school front door with a derisive bang. Several young ladies loitering in the passage raised supercilious eyebrows, whereupon Miss Dibb reasserted and improved upon her scornful statement. "Only poor people, very poor, like Naval officers and their families, eat Danish butter and collar bacon!"

XI

AUTUMN passed in varying shades of grey monotony. Sharp frosts made the air brittle, icy winds raced across the marsh and flung themselves at Tarbubbles, rattling the windows and prying through cracks. Economy in fires produced a fusty smell of damp and disuse in the house; to open the front door was like lifting the lid off a box of mildew. Despite the efforts of Miss Tresidder and Polly, a sprinkling of fine dust subdued the colours of curtains and carpets. Fingerprints marred polished furniture, white fluff accumulated under beds and settled in corners. Armed with brushes and dusters Sophy waged a losing battle from morning until night. The daily encounters left their mark upon her face, drew lines of tiredness round her eyes and furrows from her nose to the corners of her mouth.

The recriminations resulting from the Admiral's financial miscalculations declined into nervous hostility. Father and daughters watched each other suspiciously, fearful of being exploited to the advantage of the other. Sophy's labours, in which she forced the family to join, resulted in Verena and the Admiral combining in rebellion.

"I'm not going to clean any more of that ground," said Admiral Tresidder, blowing on his numbed fingers. "It's frozen hard, and is unfit work for a man of my age—besides, I wasn't trained for manual labour."

"If you don't dig now, the land won't be ready for spring sowing."

"I don't care!" he returned nonchalantly.

"I do—I must prepare for next season's vegetable supply. Luxuries such as asparagus and artichokes can be done away with and the land allocated to additional cabbages and potatoes."

"Don't provide extra cabbages for me—I loathe them," Verena interrupted.

"So do I," said the Admiral.

"As it happens I was not considering your likes or dislikes. Having ascertained that a profitable market exists for cabbages, I propose to meet the demand. Apparently the lower orders make it their staple food."

"Poor devils!" The Admiral spoke with feeling.

Visitors ceased to make the tedious journey to Tarbubbles after Mrs. Tresidder's attractions were withdrawn. Captain Vosper called once, but did not repeat his visit. Although his ship was lying in the bay, Doctor Toon made no effort to re-establish the former intimacy, despite effusive invitations from Verena. The house sank more deeply into gloomy introspection; the walls seemed to close smotheringly upon the depleted household.

To Victoria the weeks passed in a moving pattern of minor discomforts, recurring with the persistence of a gyroscope. Breakfast hurriedly eaten in the eclipsed grandeur of the chilly dining-room, followed by the long drive in the carrier's cart through wind and rain, or through fog of the uncompromising density of cotton wool, to lessons which had assumed the drab qualities of winter. Luncheons (which also followed a rotatory system beginning with cold mutton on Mondays) eaten in the gloom of the back parlour in company with Miss Carver and three chilblained little girls whose parents were missionaries in China. More lessons, another drive, altered only by direction and darkness, ending in a dreary

evening on a stiff-backed chair drawn up to the table which supported the only lamp.

Candles superseded lamps in the bedrooms at Tarbubbles; a night-light under a pink glass shade intensified the blackness of the hall and stairs. To go to bed was an adventure demanding courage and resolve.

Post cards came intermittently from Colin Dallas and added a tang of excitement to the dull routine. They gave Victoria disjointed fragments of news, curious views of people, governments, democracy, and art. Fortune favoured her wish for secrecy. Twice she met the postman at the gate, three times she was the first down to breakfast.

"Why don't you show your post cards to your aunties?" Polly inquired suspiciously.

"They wouldn't be mine any more if other people knew about them."

"Nonsense, if they're addressed to you they belong to you. I hope you're not going to be selfish and sly like your Aunt Verena."

"I don't want any one to see my post cards," Victoria stubbornly replied.

"Well, I won't tell because you're obedient and well-behaved, but I can't abide secrets and see no reason for them. They say the Cornish are mysterious in their ways, and first cousins to the Welsh, who are a dark lot. You're doubly cursed, and are the oddest child I've ever seen. You don't give yourself away, though I must say I've nothing against you so far," was the grudging admission.

§

Miss Tresidder lay awake seeking an apt definition of her father's attitude to Miriam's plea for divorce. Such descriptions as "elfin," "spiteful," "malicious," flitted through her mind, until she dismissed them as incompatible with a rotund old gentleman burdened with the weight of unmerited disgrace. But was he alive to his humiliation? He seemed pleased with the *dénouement*, as if enjoying a joke understood by nobody else. She felt responsible for his indecorous behaviour. There were occasions which warranted humorous interpretations, others which did not. No right-thinking person would hesitate to which category this unfortunate affair belonged. Shudderingly she visualized the headlines of the daily papers: "Tresidder *v.* Tresidder & Guttenburg." Perhaps she was worrying unnecessarily—he might not grant Miriam's audacious request. There were two courses open to an outraged husband—one was to release the erring wife with sorrowful magnanimity, the other to hold her a votary to marriage. The choice of remedies depended upon whether the innocent party was a passive or an active member of the Church. The Admiral, unhappily, had no pronounced opinions on right and wrong—his views were deplorably lax; he might do anything, even to allowing himself to be divorced. One of the many regrettable consequences of cutting adrift from the Church was that it left the individual free to formulate independent ideas, instead of following directions which simplified things and saved mistakes which had to be paid for. It was like making a cake "out of your head" instead of following a well-tried recipe; a departure from precedent which invariably ended in disaster . . . She must

be going to sleep to be guilty of such irreverent analogies. Finding similarity between cookery and dogma was the kind of thing she was continually correcting in Victoria . . . probably it was catching, like measles and mumps. Anyway, she would get to the bottom of her father's intentions in the morning, impress upon him that publicity must be avoided. . . .

It was late in the afternoon before she finally cornered him. The Admiral had developed an elusive quality peculiarly exasperating in an elderly gentleman. He flitted from one corner of the garden to the other with surprising agility, and had an uncanny instinct for evading capture. Several times Sophy marked him down from the upper windows, only to see his stocky figure vanishing in the distance as she reached the spot. Neither did he appear at luncheon, an occasion when the full force of reason could be brought to bear.

"Have you seen the Admiral?" she inquired of Polly Anker.

"Yes. He took some bread and cheese and an onion and said he was lunching out."

"Very peculiar—what was he wearing?"

"Just his gardening clothes and patched boots."

"Most odd!"

A fine drizzle set in during the afternoon. Uneasy with frustrated argument, Sophy waited about in the hall. The house was as silent as a mausoleum, save for ticking clocks running a never-ending race. They got on her nerves. Some ticked fast and others dawdled, but they reached four o'clock together and chimed in maddening unison. She decided to go out into the rain to look for her father—anything would be preferable to the quiet house without any one in it to whom she could speak.

She took an old cloak from the cloak-room and flung it round her shoulders.

She walked to the end of the drive and looked up and down the road. The air was heavy with the smell of rotting vegetation. A cart creaked by filled with steaming manure which left a pungent reek in its wake; a peewit cried sorrowfully from the marsh; the boom and splash of waves made a persistent undercurrent of sound. She turned, closed the gate, and took the narrow path between the rhododendron bushes which led to the kitchen garden. A wisp of grey smoke arose from the bonfire —it had not been lighted when she passed in the morning. She made a wide détour, walking on the path skirting the walls in preference to taking a direct cut across the open. The door of the potting-shed was closed, but the Admiral's cap hung conspicuously on a nail. As she raised the latch her mouth settled in a thin shrewish line.

"So there you are!"

"Yes."

The Admiral reclined comfortably within a wheelbarrow ingeniously reared upon its legs and handles, so that it formed a seat and a back to lean against. A spirit lamp and a kettle stood upon the ground; a mug of tea, a piece of currant loaf and a saucer of jam were balanced on a board laid across his knees.

"What do you imagine you're doing?" The tone was caustic.

"Having a meal."

"I can see that!"

With a knife-handle the Admiral stirred his tea before taking a noisy gulp. He omitted to wipe his beard. Drops pattered on his waistcoat, where they lay glistening like pale beads. The wedge of bread he cut into cubes—the

squares were too big for his mouth. He ate with noisy mastication.

She wondered if he were doing it purposely. Never before did she remember him to be guilty of the unpleasant sloshing sounds which outraged her frayed nerves.

"Tea would be ready in half an hour had you waited to have it in a civilized manner."

"I'm quite happy, thank you."

He lifted the board off his knees and placed it gingerly on the floor. From a ledge in the wall he took a tin of tobacco and commenced to fill his pipe. He settled more comfortably in the wheelbarrow, spreading his legs and adjusting a hump of sacking behind his head, apparently oblivious of her angry scrutiny. How obese he was . . . his trousers strained over his knees . . . his fat thighs seemed to join directly into his swelling paunch. He didn't appear to care what he looked liked, what she thought of him, what disgrace his elderly infatuation had brought upon his daughters.

Fury drove caution to the winds. "What are you going to do about Miriam's demand?"

"Nothing." He sat puffing at his pipe with his eyes half closed, looking bland, detached and faintly amused . . . like a Buddha installed in a shrine.

"She'll expect you to do something."

"Exactly—that makes it so funny."

"I don't see anything to laugh at—the whole business is deplorable."

"I'm not laughing."

"That's merely a quibble. Miriam wants you to release her from her marriage vows. What are you going to do?"

"I've told you I'm not going to do anything. The

evening of life is upon me—the time for meditation has come."

"Nonsense. You can't take up a passive attitude when action is required. You must make a decision."

"My dear Sophy, your tongue is impotent. I won't be pitted against Miriam, neither will I be coerced into stabilizing the Guttenburg *ménage*. I am a fat old man without consequence in the universal scheme. Both my orbicular body and impaired mind refuse to be galvanized into activity. I no longer wish to cut a gallant figure before female eyes, to strut like a cock trying to fascinate hens."

"You're so coarse! I suppose you caught it from Miriam. Flippancy is especially to be deprecated in the present crisis, which is essentially ethical. Such an occasion calls for prompt measures if the fabric of Christianity is to be preserved and the purity of the home maintained."

"Doubtless your arguments would goad a younger man into extravagant actions. Age has released me from imaginary obligations. I can't alter anything and I'm not going to try."

"It is your duty to explain the attitude of the Church towards divorce which Miriam overlooks."

"I dislike duties and am not going to perform any at my time of life. Besides, I'm not convinced that it is one." He closed his eyes and puffed complacently at his pipe. A look of serene magnanimity enveloped him, which increased Sophy's exasperation.

She opened the door and closed it behind her with a clatter.

§

Victoria was coming up the drive as Miss Tresidder reached the front door after her abortive interview with

the Admiral. A subconscious determination to revive her belief in herself made her pounce suspiciously upon a small parcel half concealed by Victoria's lesson books.

"What have you hidden beneath your geography?"

"A history book."

"Don't prevaricate—there's a brown-paper packet sandwiched between the two. To evade answering a direct question arouses misgiving. You must tell me at once where you got it and what it contains."

"From the postman at the gate, and I haven't opened it."

"There's nobody to send you a parcel, so it must be a mistake. Why didn't you reply straightforwardly, instead of making all this fuss and mystery?"

"It is for me, it's got my name on it."

"Let me look. Of course it's not for you. It's addressed to Miss V. Tresidder in Colin Dallas's writing. What a foolish little girl you were not to say that the packet was for your Aunt Verena—it must be a Christmas present. It should be a lesson to you not to be evasive and give people wrong ideas." Appropriating the parcel, she entered the hall and divested herself of her damp coat, which she spread to dry over a chair. Victoria slammed her books upon a table and sullenly subsided on the lowest stair to unlace her boots. She cast them into a corner with a satisfying clatter.

"Sssh!" admonished Miss Tresidder.

Her temper seemed to have a refreshing effect upon her aunt, who called in gay raillery to Polly Anker: "Miss Victoria has come back from school with a little black dog on her back."

"Why?"

Sophy shrugged her shoulders and threw out her hands

in an unaccustomed gesture. "How should I know why people lose their tempers? I'm glad to say trifles don't ruffle me, so I am a bad interpreter of causes. Perhaps vexation because the box she imagined was addressed to her is really for Verena, from Colin Dallas."

Victoria frowned in heavy embarrassment upon her aunt and Polly Anker as she listened to the translation of her emotions. She reflected that the right of self-expression was one of the most enviable endowments of maturity.

"I don't say she hasn't enough to rile her," said Polly judiciously. "But Providence works in devious ways, and as likely as not gives a wallop in the back when you're expecting a slap in the face. Punishment is punishment, whether you get it where you anticipate or whether you don't, and should be took as such. If a present finds its way to one what it doesn't belong to, a person is only being paid out in a roundabout fashion for sly secretive ways."

"You do mix your metaphors, Polly, neither do I quite follow you," Miss Tresidder spoke with recovered amiability. "The Scriptures tell us that the way of transgressors is hard, and very right and proper it is. But we must make allowances for youthful tempers. We can't expect the same self-control from young people which we exercise ourselves."

"Conceit is just as wicked in age as in youth," Polly contributed with meaning.

"Undoubtedly," Sophy complacently agreed.

Verena came in when tea was nearly over. Miss Tresidder greeted her with unusual cordiality, as if to draw a comparison with the admonitory tone she was employing to her niece.

"You'll find a pleasant surprise on the mantelpiece," she said with urbanity.

"A parcel from Colin—how thrilling!" sighed Verena as she stripped off the wrappings. "It's a necklace of shells and beads, pretty, but awfully small—like a child's. I suppose he remembers how *petite* I am. I knew he couldn't forget so easily as he pretended. Magnetism such as mine makes nothing of distance, I can make myself a 'force' even at the Cape."

"Of course you can, dear; I always said so."

XII

WHEN Victoria entered her teens Miss Tresidder insisted upon skirts reaching the ankles. Several half-holidays were spent in unpicking hems and stitching strips of sateen behind the elongations. Apparently Aunt Sophy and Polly Anker expected something untoward to happen on her birthday. Victoria became quite nervous about herself and anxiously studied her appearance in the glass, fearing that thirteen marked the boundary of a mysterious danger zone containing such afflictions as strawberry marks and squints. As the weeks passed, bringing no more serious calamity than inconveniently long skirts, she recovered her equanimity and thrust into the background Miss Tresidder's solicitous inquiries regarding health.

Spring threw Tarbubbles' desolation into high relief. Dandelions and tufts of grass sprang up in the drive, weeds appeared in the flower-beds, ivy hung in untidy festoons against the house, the kitchen garden became a wilderness of docks and nettles which concealed the residue of last season's produce rotting in rank heaps.

Indoors, the bright sunlight pitilessly revealed the thick layer of dust which accumulated at compound interest despite Sophy Tresidder's valiant efforts; the Admiral and Verena stood aside and marked with muted jubilation the ravages made by her labours. In April she bought a sack of cheap seed potatoes and on a warm Saturday afternoon commenced to plant them. For the purpose

she donned odd boots, a dress of her mother's made in Bermuda in 1886, a discarded shooting hat of the Admiral's, and a sack pinned about her waist.

Victoria, touched by her exhausted looks, volunteered to clear off the thickest weeds. They hadn't been long at work before the Admiral sauntered from the house and stood surveying them from the path. The alteration apparent in the autumn was intensified. His benign and pompous bearing had entirely gone, and was replaced by an irresponsible and almost roguish mien. Lines of experience were smoothed out, leaving his cheeks plump and pink. His demeanour was that of an impish small boy who, with the aid of a stocky body and a white beard, had disguised himself as an elderly gentleman.

"Planting spuds?" he queried amiably.

"Digging this hateful garden," Sophy resentfully corrected.

"Looks hard work." He struck a match and puffed at his pipe, looking, with his inflated cheeks and innocent expression, like a mature cherub.

Suddenly Sophy recoiled from her task with a stifled scream. "Look! I've cut it in two and both pieces are wriggling. Ough!"

With varying expressions they regarded the convulsed halves of a worm.

"Active beggar!" commented the Admiral.

"Disgusting—gardening is no work for a woman." Sophy leant upon the handle of her spade and began to cry. The hat flapped about her face, the dress trailed in the weeds, the sack tied round her middle hung limply—she looked like a scarecrow drooping under inclement weather.

Admiral Tresidder extended his foot. The heavy square-toed boot descended upon the twitching fragments

and ground them into sticky slime. Victoria struggled against a surge of sickness.

"There, it's quite dead; you needn't bother any more."

"As if polluting your boot with the entrails of a worm would make it any better! I shall dream of the way the two bits twisted into circles—first to the right, then to the left!"

He looked chagrined. "I was trying to please you. Perhaps you'd have liked it better if I'd put it into splints?"

"If you offered to dig trenches for potatoes it would be more to the point. You're getting gross for lack of exercise. When we had an adequate staff to keep the place going, you did some work; now I have everything on my hands, you sit and watch, looking like a smug heathen idol gloating over human suffering."

"I'll pay for a gardener as before, but I won't break my back digging. If you insist upon parsimonious tactics, you must bear the brunt yourself."

"It's abominable the way you talk! Any one would think it was I who'd dissipated the family fortune. Do you suppose I enjoy working as I do? I'm compelled in order to save a pittance for our old age. It's all very fine for you with a pension. You're as selfish as possible, and so complacent that I'm often tempted to throw the butter at you at meals."

"You should consult a doctor, Sophy. You're overwrought. I'll give you a guinea, then you needn't trespass on your savings."

He put his hand in his trousers pocket and produced a battered leather purse held together with a bit of knotted elastic. From it he took a sovereign and two sixpences; a shilling and a few coppers remained. There was some-

thing touching about the purse, it looked forlorn and neglected. Victoria was swept by one of the swift rushes of pity which overwhelmed her for quite insignificant causes. She noticed a tear in his coat-sleeve cobbled together with a bit of red worsted, and the frayed edges of his cuffs which made a fringe for his old hands. They were thick square hands, covered on the backs with golden hairs through which a sprinkling of freckles showed. Pathetic hands, bearing scars and the golden down of departed youth. She blinked, feeling the prick of hot tears at the back of her eyes.

With a kindly gesture he held out the money to Sophy: "There, my dear, go and get yourself made well again."

For some moments she regarded the gift with curious detachment, and then, as if playing a game of tiddly-winks, flicked the coins one by one into a bank of weeds.

§

Verena was scarcely ever at home. What she did at the convent excited tepid speculation in the minds of her sister and Polly Anker. When questioned she was evasive in her answers; but as she had to a great extent dropped out of the life at Tarbubbles, they were not sufficiently interested to pursue their inquiries, which suited Verena very well.

One day she returned in a cab with her ankle bandaged. She limped into the house with the aid of a stick, and sank exhausted upon the hall fender.

"You might pay the driver, Sophy; I haven't any money."

"What have you done with it? You should have plenty."

"Well, I haven't. If you don't give him the fare he'll probably wait all night, and still I shan't have any to pay with in the morning. But manage it your own way; we can't cut a more ridiculous figure in Weymouth than we do already."

Sophy unwillingly opened her purse. "How much is it?"

"Four shillings."

"Iniquitous! We can't afford cabs at that price."

"Do you expect me to walk from Melcombe Regis with a sprained ankle?"

"You could have waited by the clock for the carrier. I see it's useless to expect thrift in our family. You'd better let me rub your ankle with embrocation, then get to bed."

"You needn't trouble. Mère Jeanne has bound it with a compress soaked in miraculous water from Lourdes."

"I hope you won't get blood-poisoning."

Soon after this the Admiral took unexpected action which momentarily bereft Sophy of speech. She discovered him removing the contents of the potting-shed and dumping it unceremoniously on the cabbage patch.

"Are you cleaning the shed?" she asked suspiciously.

"It's going to be overhauled, but I shan't do it myself. I'm employing a Portsmouth firm who did a lot of odd jobs for me in the *Bonaventure*."

"You must be mad!"

"I don't believe in spoiling the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar."

He began to drag the grindstone into the open. The iron legs made long-drawn squeaks on the brick floor. Reaching the step, he gave the stone a downward tilt, it

overbalanced and fell with a crash into a pile of flower-pots, where it broke neatly in two.

"That's finished," Sophy angrily recorded.

"It's of no consequence," he answered airily. "Grind-stones, garden rollers and cross-cut saws are only necessary when there are men-servants to be kept employed. Otherwise such implements might as well be broken as not."

"Then why trouble to renovate the shed for the housing of worthless tools?"

"I'm not. I'm hoisting my flag here on 'the glorious first of June.'"

"I don't understand."

"Perhaps you'd care to see the plan?" He unfolded a paper from a box on the window-ledge, spread it on the joiner's bench, and with a stubby forefinger pointed out its details. "The walls will be transformed into bulk-heads and the window refitted as a scuttle with my knee-hole desk beneath. A bunk crosses the far end, my service chest of drawers stands opposite; a table and an arm-chair will scull about in the middle. The adjoining woodshed I'm having bricked in and converted into a galley. Together they will form a convenient abode for a seafaring man who has become a burden to his family."

Sophy regarded him with raised eyebrows. Embarrassed by the scrutiny, he shuffled his feet, and said humbly: "I'm only keeping a hundred a year for myself, you can have all the rest, and I shall always be pleased to give you tea when you're passing this end of the garden."

"Money couldn't wipe out such an insult—the idea of you preferring a potting-shed to the comforts of Tar-bubbles! Any one would think I hadn't looked after you

properly. If Miriam gets to hear, she'll put a humiliating construction upon it—probably suspect me of neglect. At least a reason should be forthcoming for such extraordinary conduct."

"I want to meditate in my declining years. Everything's in a turmoil up at the house. You and Polly scuttling round after dust and getting peevish because you can't overtake it, finally rounding on me because I've spilt tobacco ash on the tablecloth. Then you're always harping on the lost money—any reasonable person would say I had the right to lose it if I wished—it belonged to me," he complained petulantly. The illusion of rubicund youth enveloped him like a veil, through which peeped the sad spectre of old age.

"The explanation of your behaviour is even more amazing than your action. Don't trouble to tell me more. I am accustomed to the ingratitude of you and Verena, and can bear it. I shall continue to do my best for you. Pray let me know when you tire of your peculiar residence, so that I may prepare your room at Tarbubbles." She turned and with stately displeasure walked towards the house.

§

Victoria watched with sympathetic interest the conversion of the potting-shed into a replica of her grandfather's cabin in the *Black Prince*. She made chintz curtains for the scuttle and an ornamental cover for the bunk, and helped in the choosing of a red carpet as near to the familiar seaweed pattern as possible.

"I hope funds will pan out," said her grandfather. "It's been much more expensive than I expected, and I don't want to feel I'm robbing the girls of money to which I'm not entitled."

"I'm sure it's all right," Victoria returned soothingly. Her feelings for her grandfather had become strangely protective. He was, she felt, quite incapable of managing things for himself.

He continued more cheerfully: "Even if the fitting out has been costly, I can recover by being economical afterwards. Meals shall be reduced to two a day. I'll buy sausages, which are easily cooked, sustaining and cheap considering the meat they contain. Perhaps I may become thinner—it's a long time since I saw my boots."

Victoria was invited to tea on his first day in his new quarters. Together they hoisted his flag on the staff fixed to the corner of the house, and excitedly watched it billow out on the warm summer breeze.

"I wish the girls took an interest in my cabin. Sophy's not entered the kitchen garden since I told her of my plans, and Verena hasn't asked anything about it. I suppose she's too wrapped up in religion to be concerned with trivialities."

Letters from Colin Dallas now came regularly by every mail. Since the downfall of prosperity the household had become later in its habits, so it was comparatively easy for Victoria to waylay the postman. The deceit of this practice did not trouble her, neither could she have explained why she wished to make a mystery of the correspondence.

Admiral Tresidder was also an early riser. By seven o'clock he had his mattress airing in the sun, and bacon sizzling in a frying-pan.

"Next quarter I mean to buy a Dutch oven and hang the rashers on hooks; they taste better roasted than cooked over the fire."

"We haven't had our breakfast," said Victoria.

"I've noticed you're getting later and later. It's odd that your Aunt Sophy pays more attention to cleaning than maintaining comfortable conditions. I've always heard women were careless over meals if left to their own devices. Happiness is preserved by a good breakfast at a regular hour. One is then in a better position to parry argument."

"I don't know why there should be any."

"Neither do I, but there always is." He transferred the bacon to a tin plate, and carried it through to the cabin. "I met the postman this morning: he gave me a card for you from young Dallas. It's very ugly and has been used as a stand for a beer-mug."

Victoria was confused. "I think he sends anything he finds in the mess."

"It's a bad policy. In my young days I had more respect for the object of my affection."

"But I'm only a little girl."

"You're growing."

Victoria felt pleasantly embarrassed by the construction placed upon the young sailor's interest. Her thoughts of Colin changed imperceptibly. They became personal and were tinged with self-consciousness.

Admiral Tresidder continued the train of thought which the post card had aroused. "Young people expect to find affinities round every corner. I did myself. The strange part was that I recognized her in such diverse types and forgot all about the ones I'd met before."

"But there must be an affinity for somebody," said Victoria distressfully.

"You wait," said her grandfather as he poured his tea into the saucer to cool.

XIII

VERENA'S ankle remained weak despite the application of miraculous water. As she was unable to get to the convent, the nuns in couples visited her, and were to be met with in dark corners of passages or stealing upstairs like black wraiths. With humility they took possession of Tarbubbles; their presence was potent as the smell of their well-worn apparel which hung about the house as a frowsy effluvium. Their habit of appearing at odd hours and mysterious manner of entry got upon Miss Tresidder's nerves.

"If it wasn't so sultry, I'd bolt the windows and doors and oblige them to ring a bell."

"It would be no manner of use. Those versed in sorcery get in by ways we know nothing of." Polly Anker's tone was dour.

"If they'd walk like ordinary women I could put up with it—but they glide, as if they were on wheels."

"Like pairs of black corpses bearing down on one," added Polly.

Sophy was careful to conceal her agitation from her sister, fearful that the sign of weakness might diminish authority. Accompanied by Victoria, she went up to Verena's bedroom after tea. They found the invalid lying on the sofa embroidering a velvet altar-cloth in gold thread.

"Several sheets are waiting to be turned sides-to-middle," Sophy said pointedly.

"Are they?" Verena returned agreeably. Her manner, admirably poised, checkmated militant designs. Sophy looked about for a new line of attack, and found it in the atmosphere, faintly redolent of unwashed linen and conserved perspiration.

"I know by the odour that those nuns have been here again."

"Mother Serafina and Mère Jeanne had tea with me," Verena answered politely.

"One can't get away from them, creeping like blackbeetles, prying goodness knows where. I found a couple in the glass cupboard the other day."

"Mother Pauline was making me some lemonade. Really I must take exception to the way you speak of my spiritual advisers. One would think you were the only person privileged to entertain representatives of the Church. I'm sure I never complain about the Macmullins, and a more objectionable crowd couldn't be found if you hunted from here to Timbuctoo."

"At all events they stay in one place and don't monopolize the house."

"On the contrary, the last time they came I discovered little Savonarola being sick into my waste-paper basket."

Sophy momentarily was at a loss. To create a diversion Victoria picked up one of Verena's bobbins and wound a thread round her finger.

"Is it real gold?" she asked.

"Bullion."

"Where did you get it?" demanded Sophy.

"At a London shop which specializes in ecclesiastical embroideries."

"I hope you didn't buy these costly materials? It's not as if you were capable of undertaking the work.

You couldn't manage even the splash-mat I asked you to do for the spare room."

"I've had lessons since then. Reverend Mother herself asked me to embroider the altar-cloth."

"Those everlasting nuns!" Sophy ejaculated angrily.

"Exactly! You seem surprised I should put my religion before everything. Yours is the variety that can be taken from a drawer on Sunday with your best hat and white kid gloves."

Sophy darted a furious look at her sister. "You're extremely personal and rude. Have you forgotten we were taught that to make a parade of religion was vulgar? Many precepts of our dear mother are transgressed by you."

"And the ones you've remembered have been twisted out of recognition."

"Although you're impervious to rebuke, as an elder sister, I must tell you that it is your duty to contribute to the household expenses before refurbishing the convent."

"I have a right to live rent free in my father's house so long as I remain single."

"Only if circumstances permit. We have lost most of our income, and you keep your share of mother's fortune for yourself. If you contributed half to the general expenses, it would enhance your independence and assist me."

"What are you doing with your money?"

Sophy coloured, but answered boldly: "I'm making a fund which will form a pension for our old age."

"But suppose I don't mean to live with you?"

"You'll have no choice unless you marry. A woman cannot manage on a hundred a year. By foresight I shall have amassed a good deal more, which I shall be willing to share."

"You've driven father out into the potting-shed. Heaven knows where you'll drive me."

"Don't talk nonsense! We'll have a cottage somewhere. Perhaps by then you'll have learnt to be more accommodating."

"Who knows?" said Verena.

§

Victoria won the geography prize for the summer term, wresting it from Miss Dibb, who was a close competitor. Gladys took her defeat hardly, and strove to make it clear that her rival's success was in no way due to merit.

"Of course Carvie's dotty, and only gave you the prize because you're the granddaughter of an Admiral."

"That hadn't anything to do with it."

"Although every one in Weymouth knows your Grandpa's crazy, and you're all eccentric and poor as church mice. My Pa says your order's hardly worth executing. If it wasn't for Ma, who's sorry for you, the goods wouldn't be delivered all that way."

"There are numerous grocers—one tradesman is the same as another. It's immaterial which firm supplies our needs."

"You've got cheek to talk as you do, considering the way you all behave. It's a treat to see your Aunt Verena walking between a couple of nuns looking so pi. with her downcast eyes, remembering the way she used to ogle the boys on the prom. Turned over a new leaf, I don't think! As for your Grandpa, he ought to be put away."

"I don't understand your phraseology," Victoria answered grandly.

"You know very well what I mean! I mean your Grandpa ought to be put somewhere to be taken care of.

Me and Mona Mimms followed him the other day after he'd been to our place to buy sausages and cheese. A loaf and a pair of patched boots were sticking out of a knapsack; dangling on a string from his pocket was a little sword made of matchwood. And he kept saluting the visitors along the front—they didn't half laugh, I can tell you!"

"You have such a remarkable sense of humour!" said Victoria scathingly.

Miss Dibb responded complacently: "Pa says I'm a rare one to see a joke."

§

From the day he established himself in the potting-shed the Admiral never entered Tarbubbles or crossed an invisible boundary which separated his domain from the remainder of the garden. As Sophy Tresidder ignored the existence of the cabin, and Verena was apathetic, the increasing peculiarity of his manner was unobserved. Victoria watched him anxiously. For several days he would be a benevolent, slightly pompous old gentleman who read books on Naval history and smoked innumerable pipes of strong tobacco. Then one morning she would find him wearing an old mess jacket, a cocked hat of newspaper, and the wooden sword described by Gladys Dibb. On these occasions his expression altered indefinably. Lines were smoothed out, a look of innocent expectation shone in his wide blue eyes.

"What are you doing with that queer little sword?" Victoria asked.

"It is customary to carry one when visiting a monarch. I propose calling upon His Majesty King George III, whose effigy embellishes the downs above Preston. As

my proper sword is up at the house, as well as my cocked hat, I made replicas which will probably deceive a King who is himself composed of chalk."

"Were you thinking of going this morning?"

The Admiral consulted a card upon his writing-table. "He holds a levée at twelve."

"That is a pity. I hoped you'd walk with me to Redcliffe Point. I've boiled some eggs for lunch, and brought my bathing clothes."

A look of pleasurable excitement flitted across his face.

"You'd be disappointed if I didn't come?" he asked eagerly.

"Dreadfully."

He untied the wooden sword and laid it on the table. "I will postpone my call until a future occasion. His Majesty is likely to retain his present position for some centuries to come, so there is no hurry, no hurry."

"Won't you take a more comfortable hat? It's a hot morning. As you are not visiting the King, another would do as well."

"I'll wear my panama; it's shady, although a trifle shabby. All my clothes are shabby, but I haven't the money to make myself shipshape. I'm putting by in a thrift box for my funeral. I don't want to feel that my death would be an embarrassment. When I've saved enough I'll buy a new suit—blue with gold buttons."

"I should buy it now."

"But I might die soon. What would be the use of a suit if all I needed was a grave?" Chuckling to himself, he opened a drawer, and after rummaging, pulled out a roll of canvas and some skeins of coloured wools. "I'll take my work to the cliffs with me—the Fighting *Téméraire* under sail." He spread his picture proudly upon the

table, a three-decker embroidered in black and white, gallantly riding upon a sea of blue worsted. "I've still the sky to fill in, and the base of Penlee Point. The rigging I shall fix later in silk thread."

"It's lovely!" said Victoria, greatly impressed by the work of art.

§

The Admiral's behaviour so worried Victoria that at last she decided to speak to her Aunt Sophy, whom she found in the lumber-room examining old clothes from a trunk standing open in the centre of the floor.

"Mrs. Macmullin asked me to look out some things for the church jumble, but really these dresses of my mother's are too good to discard. I'd no idea so much wear was left in the materials. This blue-and-yellow-spotted gown would make you an admirable school frock, and the green pelisse would convert into something."

Victoria viewed the antiquated garments with disfavour. Beauty as well as substance was required from clothing. The spotted dress was strangely reminiscent of illustrations in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although the exact connexion eluded her. Presently Miss Tresidder picked the dress up again. "Mother had this made in Bermuda by our nurse named Gloriana. She was as black as a piece of coal, and wore a red bandana over her wool."

Victoria regarded the gown with increased aversion. "I don't think I care about having it."

"Beggars cannot be choosers. You ought to be grateful that I am willing to give it away. All dear mother's things belong to me, as the elder daughter."

"I'd rather wear what I've got—I don't like the dress."

Miss Tresidder's lips settled into the thin line which

was becoming habitual. She took the gown by the neck and commenced to fold it. Having reduced it to a neat square, she laid it aside. "I'll set to work upon it to-morrow."

Victoria abruptly broke a long acrimonious silence: "I think you ought to go and see Granddaddy—I'm sure he's not well."

"I saw him in the drive this morning—he looked all right. If he feels poorly, I suppose he'll have sufficient sense to return to the house. I've too much on my hands to worry about people who bring troubles upon themselves. You can take down a seidlitz powder. I'll put one in an envelope, then you can feign ignorance of the contents."

"It's not an inside illness."

"Then what is it? You employ words so vaguely."

"He acts like a little boy who's playing a game of make-believe. It doesn't seem right for an old gentleman."

"If I saw him I couldn't alter his conduct or mode of life, so I shall take no notice."

Nevertheless Victoria's remarks weighed uncomfortably upon Miss Tresidder's conscience. Throughout the night she visualized her father in a dying condition. The moaning of the wind, which had risen since dusk, added colour to misgiving, and in her inflamed imagination became the agonized groans of a neglected parent.

At six o'clock she rose and started to dress. Catching sight of her face in the glass, she was dismayed by her appearance. The sleepless night had taken heavy toll. Dark rings encircled her eyes, lines running from her nose to the corners of her mouth were marked as with an indelible pencil. Middle age had overthrown her in the darkness, and scored the faded skin of the thirties with a prophetic tracery.

Having consistently prided herself upon the simplicity of her toilet, she was without the aids to beauty which might have repaired the ravages. She drifted unhappily to the bathroom, where she discovered a jar of vaseline left by the Admiral. Smearing some on her fingers, she vigorously rubbed the lines. Friction brought colour to her cheeks, but the grease produced an unbecoming shine; she dipped a corner of a towel in boracic powder and applied it lavishly. Reassured, she brushed her hair, coiled it on the top of her head and encased it in a net, making it look round and neat like a football.

Out in the garden the wind, which had howled so dismally during the night, blew gently on the unkempt lawn and tossed the long grass into sighing ripples. She turned the corner of the house and entered the kitchen garden. There was now no question of a cut across the open. Weeds grew waist high, puny flowers on long degenerate stalks sprouted from the roots of unharvested cabbages; a rotten marrow from a straggling plant lay moist and obscene in the middle of the path.

As Sophy neared the potting-shed a savoury smell of bacon assailed her nostrils. She came upon the Admiral from the rear, bending over the stove to prod a sausage with a small two-pronged fork. It was an unprepossessing view and may have accounted for the slight annoyance in her tone.

"I expected you to be ill," she said accusingly.

Surprised, he looked up and straightened himself. An old Naval scarf eked out with string encircled his massive waist and sustained patched grey trousers; a faded blue shirt without a collar strained over his body.

She thought how silly the tiny fork looked in his hand . . . like a toothpick in the trunk of an elephant.

"I expected you to be ill," she reiterated.

"Well, I'm not—I'm going to have my breakfast. Do you know beef sausages are cheaper than pork? It's the kind of retrenchment you'd appreciate, although they're not so good. Personally I buy them only at the end of the month, when economy is compulsory."

"Do you suppose I prefer substitutes?"

He snapped in swift irritation: "How should I know?" With knitted brows he poured coffee from a pan into a tin jug, and exchanged a kettle for the frying-pan. "That's for washing-up. One has to think ahead, living like this."

"You appear to have made yourself very comfortable."

"Quite. If you care to come into the cabin, there is an easy chair. I can't offer you breakfast—this is my last sausage and rasher."

"I don't seek hospitality. I can get food at the house."

"You've got everything, haven't you?" he remarked mildly.

"I've anxieties," she answered with asperity.

"You've got a larder, hot and cold water and a bath."

"Absurd—as if they were of any consequence!"

"They are most important. Lately I've thought a lot about savages and their hardships—they're denied taps, larders, and modern sanitation."

"To think I hurried down imagining you were ill only to find you eating bacon and talking nonsense! It's the last time I shall worry—you look fatter than ever!"

"I'm afraid I am putting on weight." He soaked a piece of bread in the grease and sucked it appreciatively. "What have you done with your face, Sophy? It looks as if you had fallen into the flour-bin."

"An endeavour to repair the ravages of a sleepless night."

"Poor Sophy—you're not so young as you were!" he said consolingly.

She got up, feeling unreasonably hurt. "I'm glad you're well and happy," she said in a lifeless tone.

She left the cabin and walked slowly towards the house, thwarted and disappointed. Anxious to be kind and forgiving, she now felt as if a gift had been forcibly returned. Despite her good intentions, nobody seemed to want her. Tears of self-pity welled up and brimmed over. She looked up at Tarbubbles silhouetted against the blue summer sky. Weeping made it look jagged and grotesque, like a cripple shivering in the sunlight.

XIV

TO Victoria time was divided into compartments which joined and merged, yet retained distinct characteristics. They stretched behind her like blocks of colour set side by side. Each period had its own atmosphere and awakened a response which never synchronized with the demands of another period, although it was possible giddily to leap back into feelings which belonged to a bygone wedge of time. This would happen unexpectedly and leave her spiritually breathless, as if she had vaulted from bar to bar of a rainbow. The experience became alarming when she leapt beyond the blocks of time recorded in her memory and swung like a pendulum through silver space that was vague and yet familiar, and, instead of sliding back into the present with the ease associated with other backward journeys, fell dizzily.

The months taken up by the family misfortunes constituted an interval distinctive as any: it encompassed the household in a dense cloud from whence there was no escape.

As autumn advanced the Tresidders pursued their individual ways with increased determination. Verena's movements no longer aroused curiosity; the Admiral's peculiar mode of living became an established fact; Sophy's economic bent reduced life to a drab survival, principally maintained upon a fare of bread, potatoes, fish, and cocoa.

At the end of the summer holidays Victoria was urged to apply herself more diligently to education.

"If you work hard you might get a Scholarship to another school, or even become assistant to Miss Carver. Teaching is a career which may be followed by gentlewomen. Otherwise you'll have to be a hospital nurse, which will not be so nice."

The injunction had a blighting effect upon Victoria, and necessitated a readjustment of ideas. She had regarded education as a bleak ocean over which female children struggled in order to achieve halcyon days of ease commonly attained at the age of seventeen and proclaimed by done-up hair, long skirts, balls, and boxes of chocolates. Victoria entertained grave doubts as to the pleasures accruing from idleness, or her ability to outshine competitors who had attained the same goal, but she was convinced such a fate was infinitely preferable to teaching relays of stupid little girls or tending a succession of maimed men and women. The future stretched ahead in gloomy perspective; lessons, only endurable by their limited duration, now extended illimitably towards old age, the rides in the carrier's cart merged into endless journeys over a road which led nowhere.

The only bright gleam in the dreary prospect came from the letters and post cards arriving regularly from Colin Dallas. Admiral Tresidder, with a natural bias towards intrigue, constituted himself go-between in the illicit correspondence, and met the postman in all weathers.

"It's a pity the youngster hasn't a greater liking for his profession," he observed after reading Colin's revolutionary sentiments. "Discipline, amiability and an alert eye for the foibles of brass hats are the talismans which lead to promotion. If a watchkeeper has ideas which don't

coincide with the notions of his seniors, it is expedient to suppress them. I never voiced an opinion until I had secured my third stripe."

"Colin says he doesn't believe in diplomacy, which is another name for trickery. He thinks it right to say what he thinks on every occasion."

"That's a pity—a great pity! A young man should employ himself in discovering the views of his betters, and when opportunity occurs, put them forward diffidently as his own. This ensures a reputation for perspicacity and right thinking which stands him in good stead when his name comes before the selection board."

"I don't think Colin cares anything for promotion or the Navy either."

"It all comes about through having an Italian mother. One can't expect to find proper sentiments in foreigners."

§

Once again November fogs embraced Tarbubbles in clammy folds. Papers peeled off walls in damp shreds, and re-attached with a mixture of strong paste by Miss Tresidder, left patterns of themselves on her hands. In the evenings a fire was lit in what had been the Admiral's study. Bricks, which served the dual purpose of reducing the size of the grate and the temper of the coal, carried out their mission so effectively that it became Victoria's duty periodically to revive the fire with bellows.

"Everything is so inferior in these days," Sophy complained to Verena. "I'm sure all our best coal is going to Germany for their fleet, leaving us nothing but shale."

"It's because you won't pay the price—you can't expect kitchen nuts to burn without a draught. There is a splendid fire in the convent parlour."

"Nuns have inexhaustible funds behind them. The money they obtain from selling candles to the congregation would probably purchase a small coal-mine."

"You're so extraordinarily bigoted and ignorant. Reverend Mother was remarking yesterday upon the narrowness of the Protestant Church and deploring that its followers encouraged themselves in intolerance."

"Extremely impertinent of her to pass judgment upon a matter of which she knows nothing. Personally I have found broad-mindedness characteristic of the Church of England."

A sore throat kept Victoria in bed for the last week of November. Although she had slept for two years in the overcrowded night-nursery, it felt as strange to her as on the first evening. Toys, pictures, books and furniture loyally maintained allegiance to their rightful owners. The hostile gaze was unmitigated in the eyes of the dolls jostling in a drunken row, the shop-front fell unerringly upon her head if she were so foolhardy as to tamper with it, illustrations improved with crayons by a juvenile Aunt Sophy detached themselves from books and fluttered out of reach beneath the bed.

Day after day rain fell in a slanting grille from colourless skies, trickled down window-panes, gurgled and splashed from the roof gutters that were choked with leaves. Sometimes a ship would cross the horizon, like a toy drawn by a string over a grey tablecloth. A flock of gulls circled above the headland; behind the Coast-guard cottages a sailor's wife hung out washing between the showers.

After three days Victoria became anxious about her grandfather. She wakened in the night fancying she heard him calling, then lay listening to the gurgling

gutter and the dismal moan of the wind. She endured foreboding for another twenty-four hours before confiding her fears to Miss Tresidder.

"I'm sure there's something wrong with Granddaddy. I wish you'd go and see."

"When I was a little girl and called for help without cause, my elders reminded me of the boy who cried 'Wolf.' On the last occasion, when you told me your grandfather was ill, I satisfied myself that he was in the best of health."

"This time I know something is wrong."

"You place too little reliance upon the judgment of those in authority. If there was cause for alarm, I should be the first to go to his assistance."

Two mornings later the Admiral was discovered by the postman lying in a forlorn heap by the gate. With the aid of Polly Anker he was brought to the house and carried upstairs to the bleak grandeur of the best bedroom. Dust sheets were torn from furniture; blankets cast in piles upon the floor; a shutter was thrown back and a window opened.

They laid him on the ornate grey bed he had shared with Miriam. An eiderdown of pale pink satin had been spread hastily over the mattress, his head rested on one of the lace cushions which Miriam preferred to pillows.

He wore the patched flannel trousers which Sophy remembered from the summer; a sweater darned in many-coloured wools; an old uniform coat. She noticed that his wet boots had left a smear of mud on the eiderdown. She began to rub the mark with her handkerchief, and checked herself. Dirt, which mattered so much at ordinary times, was of no consequence when people were dead. Like meals . . . it was after nine and nobody had had breakfast . . . she and Verena were still in their

dressing-gowns, and Polly Anker had forgotten to fasten her bodice, which showed a gap of red flannel. She wondered when the postman would go . . . householders would be waiting for their letters . . . there must be a time limit for delivery . . . of course he had been very kind . . . she hoped he wouldn't again describe finding the Admiral . . . the lower orders appreciated drama through repetition . . . like cows chewing the cud.

They continued to stand in a helpless semicircle looking down at the old man lying in serene detachment upon the luxurious bed.

The postman shuffled his feet and bent to pick his sack from the floor.

"I must be getting along," he said in a thick whisper; "it's given me a shock, I can tell you, finding him like that. All huddled up he was, with his head in the bushes, just as he'd fallen. If I'd been a bit earlier I might have saved him. He's been behaving queer for some time—a clot of blood on the brain, I shouldn't wonder. There'll be an inquest, I expect, always is in sudden death. I had a brother-in-law took suddenly—there was an inquest, they found his was a clot."

"You've been very kind," murmured Sophy, gathering her turkey-red dressing-gown about her.

"Glad to have been of service; but it's given me a shock, I can tell you, finding him like that. Expect he was waiting for the young lady's letter—it came this morning, I'll give it to you."

She took it and absently read the address. A part of her mind not so numbed as the remainder noticed with surprise that the writing was Colin's. She put the envelope in her pocket. Victoria must be spoken to later . . . apparently there was no age too young for deceit.

The postman stood in the doorway, reluctant to go.

"It's nice to leave him looking so peaceful after finding him like that. It gave me a shock, I can tell you . . ."

§

Sophy Tresidder was greatly disappointed that the Admiral was not entitled to a Naval funeral. Her request for a firing party was courteously refused by the Captain-in-Charge at Portland to whom she applied. He referred her to the Regulations at the end of the quarterly Navy List regarding retired officers, but on his own account offered the loan of a Union Jack to cover the coffin. As this seemed the best she could hope for, she accepted the flag, which arrived in a canvas bag on the morning of the funeral.

Sophy, Verena and Victoria came down to breakfast in their new black dresses and moved uneasily about the rooms plunged in artificial twilight. In the hall and dining-room fires battled grimly against damp air. Moisture drawn from upholstery settled like a bloom upon polished furniture, perspiration broke out on wall-papers and trickled down skirting-boards.

The post brought a wreath ordered by Sophy from a florist in Dorchester. Beneath coverings of tissue paper was a stiff lifebuoy of beheaded white chrysanthemums finished with a perky bunch of white lilies.

"It looks very artificial and common," said Verena.

"It cost enough. White flowers always look unreal. I can't think why they are grown, save for funerals."

"I saw the flowers the nuns have chosen for the cross they are sending. Browny-red chrysanthemums with a clump of yellow roses in the middle. The Mère

Économe was in a florist's in Paris before she took the veil."

"I'm sure it's meant kindly, but I can't think why they're sending anything. The choice sounds more suitable as a *cadeau* to a *demi-monde* than a token of respect for the dead."

"You're so Victorian in your ideas. It's quite usual to send coloured flowers nowadays. King Edward sent a cushion of pink carnations to a funeral only the other day.

"Very likely—but his mother would not have done so."

"Exactly." Verena's smile was superior.

Victoria was not to accompany her aunts to the cemetery because her throat was still inflamed, but she was taken to see her grandfather in his coffin. She looked down at his waxen face apologetically, feeling she was taking advantage of his defencelessness. His beard had been clipped and his hair parted in an unaccustomed way; a thin satin cover was drawn smoothly over his body; a stiff frill surrounded him like the paper lace on a chocolate box. Sympathy for the indignity cut through her like a knife. In her embarrassment she turned away and walked to the window.

"Aren't you going to kiss your grandfather for the last time?" Miss Tresidder asked incredulously.

"No," Victoria answered in a muffled voice.

"I'm glad he doesn't know that you wouldn't, it would grieve him exceedingly."

Victoria surrendered to tears. "He'd be glad somebody respected his dignity."

"We have respected it."

"Not properly, or you wouldn't allow that frill."

"It's the correct finish," said her aunt.

The Admiral's cocked hat and sword lay on the Union Jack as the coffin was carried out of Tarbubbles. The wreath from Sophy, Verena and Victoria was put into the hearse afterwards with the sheaf of red roses sent from London by Sir Thomas Tresidder, who was prevented by gout from attending his brother's funeral. The cross made by the nuns and a floral anchor big enough to moor a battleship from Miriam, were placed on the roof by the direction of Sophy.

"I don't know how that woman has the effrontery to send anything!"

"I'm glad she did—the flowers are meagre enough as it is." Verena mopped her reddened eyes with a handkerchief.

"It just shows how quickly people are forgotten."

"If you'd only put the announcement in *The Times* there'd have been response. As it is, nobody knows father is dead."

"It was inserted in the newspapers of the three Naval ports," said Sophy defensively.

"Local papers are only read on occasions when people are expecting their own names to appear."

Sophy and Verena descended the steps and climbed into the waiting carriage. The hearse moved down the drive at a snail's pace in accordance with the slow march of the undertakers who walked on either side.

XV

THE lecture contemplated by Miss Tresidder was delayed until a decent interval after the Admiral's death, and lost nothing by the postponement. She found in Victoria's secret correspondence with Colin Dallas grave grounds for foreboding. It indicated a deceitful nature, and a precocious development of feelings which lay dormant in nice women until "the right time." Victoria did not understand what she meant, but the interview left a smear across her mind, and created a coolness between them.

Miss Tresidder had expected her admonitions to be productive of a contrite demeanour, and was unprepared for the chilly antagonism which made itself felt. She wished with more than usual fervour that her niece had been a nice sensible girl without these unexpected reserves and animosities. Unable to bear the strained relationship, she started to make overtures to Victoria, who accepted the capitulation politely, but without raising the intangible barrier.

Sophy began nervously: "Perhaps you'd like to help me with dismantling the cabin, as you were so attached to your grandfather?"

Victoria laid down the book she was reading. "Do you want me to come now?"

"When you're ready, dear."

Victoria went upstairs for her cape. On her return she found her aunt waiting at the top of the back-door steps.

They walked in single file through a tangle of rusty

weeds towards the potting-shed. Miss Tresidder raised her head and sniffed appreciatively.

"I can always feel the tang of spring in the air."

"I can't."

"I'm exceptionally susceptible to changes of atmosphere," she proudly explained.

The cabin looked abandoned and forlorn. The flag of a Vice-Admiral hung in soiled tatters from the post; a hatchet and some chopped wood lay on the step; a bucket of water half full of leaves stood beneath the window.

Miss Tresidder, looking about in a business-like way, caught sight of the flag. "We'll begin with this. Sentimental emblems are such a mistake. Father should have left his flag behind him in his last command instead of bringing it here." She gave a tug to the halyard and brought the flag fluttering down. They looked at the dirty white and red folds lying at their feet. "It's ragged to bits by the wind, too far gone even for a house flannel."

"You couldn't use it for washing floors!"

"Why not? It's pure wool."

Sophy rolled the flag in a bundle and laid it on the sill. "I'm afraid there'll be a quantity of papers to deal with. He was so unmethodical—almost casual."

The door was on the latch, and the cabin as the Admiral had left it on the morning of his death. A thick cup and saucer, a knife and fork and a pot of marmalade were laid ready for breakfast; a kettle filled with water was ready for boiling in the adjoining galley. His bunk was made and his nightshirt folded on the pillow. The worsted picture of the *Téméraire*, weighed down by a pile of books, lay face down on the desk.

"He finished it!" Victoria cried gladly.

"Finished what?"

"The Fighting *Téméraire*."

"He couldn't have, dear. That ship sank a long time ago, or was broken up; I can't remember the exact circumstances."

"This is a needlework picture."

"How very foolish! Nobody wants decorations of that type nowadays."

"I'd like to have it for my room."

"Of course you can keep it. I don't want to deny you a keepsake of your grandfather, but I don't think there will be space to hang it. There is so much on the walls already."

"When we move, are we taking all those toys and books that you had when you were little?"

"I couldn't possibly get rid of things which hold such tender associations. You're growing too big for them, but you'll be very glad of playthings for your own little girls when the time comes."

§

Sophy Tresidder decided to vacate Tarbubbles on Lady Day. She began to search for likely houses, and went so far afield as Buckland Ripers and Chickerell, where she found many tumbledown mansions, but no ideal cottages promising ease and comfort. She looked at the new villas to be let at moderate rents which were being erected at Westham. Planted in straight rows on the low-lying land between the backwater and the cemetery, they had, to Miss Tresidder's fastidious fancy, all the attributes of a slum in the making. These fruitless expeditions made her weary and disappointed.

"If we don't find anything suitable before quarter day,

I don't know what we'll do," she lamented to Polly.

"Flasher's End might suit if you weren't so faddy. It's been empty for years, but a coat of paint and some wash would work wonders."

"The rooms are very low and small, and the side is against the road."

"You can't expect Buckingham Palace for twenty pounds a year."

The next morning Miss Tresidder took a walk up the road and looked at Flasher's End with greater leniency. It returned her scrutiny with the kindliness of a friend whose features were familiar. The door in the middle had windows on either side and three above, the red roof slanted at a sharp angle, chimneys reared themselves at either end. Just such a house as Sophy drew as a child, just such a house as she still drew on the blotting-pad in idle moments. She regarded it with increased favour—even tokens of decay held an appeal.

She pressed her face against the window abutting on the road. A rusty iron grate with a marble mantelpiece and curb faced her; a Victorian innovation at war with the worm-eaten wainscoting. The open door showed a passage with a narrow stair and built-in cupboard.

She walked back to the front of the house and pushed the crazy gate. A moss-grown straight path led to the wooden porch, another ran from the front door to the stream at the bottom of the garden. Beyond the blackthorn hedge was a turnip field belonging to the farm seen from the back windows of Tarbubbles.

A tangle of roses and ivy against the house made investigation difficult, but she was able to see the ravages made by wind and weather. Dilapidated as the place was, it had more to commend it than the horrible modern

villas and ruined manors offered by house agents. She decided to get the key.

That evening she approached Verena. "I looked over Flasher's End this afternoon and have practically taken it."

"It's nothing but a hovel—the coachman lived there when we first came."

"Circumstances were different. As things are, it is the most suitable house I have seen. Unfortunately it will mean selling a lot of our furniture."

"I should think so indeed! The entire ground floor is hardly so big as the grand piano."

"An immaterial point, as we shan't require the Broadwood."

"Do you intend to live like a cottager?"

"I shall maintain the status of a gentlewoman. The upright Collard from the morning-room will better accord with our reduced means. A quiet acceptance of misfortune is more becoming than an ostentatious parade of our former prosperity."

"It doesn't make any difference to me either way. Had I been asked, I should have said that the deliberate choice of an inferior article was equally ostentatious."

Sophy was nettled, and retorted huffily: "You're becoming very opinionated."

"Your idea of me doesn't signify," Verena returned with an air of triumph.

§

Tarbubbles was to be let or sold. A board announced it to passers-by; a placard on the gate intimated that an auction of valuable household furniture would be held on Lady Day.

With her usual thoroughness Sophy Tresidder com-

menced dismantling. She emptied the drawing-room and study in order to store the furniture destined for Flasher's End, and then was faced with the problem of stowing the homeless articles removed from both rooms.

Verena peevishly endured the disturbance. "I can't understand why you disarrange things. The curios from the drawing-room would have sold better as they were. Now they're so muddled we can't tell a Ju-ju from a trinket."

"The auctioneer can tell them in mixed lots."

On the whole Verena displayed little interest in the preparations. When asked if she would care to exchange her bedroom furniture for the grey satinwood suite left by Miriam, her indifference offended Sophy.

"I thought you'd be delighted to live with such beautiful things. The wardrobe with its revolving mirrors and concealed electric lights is a unique piece of furniture."

"The batteries ran down months ago."

"But they could be replaced, and the lamps are intact. Of course we should never go to the expense," she hastily amended.

"Then what's the object of holding them out as an attraction?"

"The mirrors are as good as ever."

"You're welcome to the suite, but it'll never fit into the tiny bedroom at Flasher's End."

"It will."

Whilst Sophy stripped the house, Verena distributed her possessions in a manner surprising in one usually so ungenerous. Every day she took a bundle of clothes to the convent. Pictures and ornaments disappeared from her room; she astonished Victoria on her birthday with the gift of a seed pearl necklace and turquoise ring.

"You'll regret what you're doing," Sophy warned.

"It's best to keep mother's jewellery in the family. You've got plenty."

"You need it for yourself. Victoria's too young for ornaments; if you wished to give them to her later, you could do so."

"I mightn't be here."

"Nonsense."

§

Flasher's End was to be ready for occupation by the middle of March. The landlord, in his relief at finding tenants, had been prodigal with paint and wall-paper. The old house was rejuvenated, like a dowager wearing a coat of rouge.

Sophy finished hanging the parlour curtains with a sigh of satisfaction.

"There's one advantage about a small room, it does look cosy."

"Or poky," said Verena.

"It's too bad of you to look at the worst side of things. Flasher's End is quite a nice house viewed on its merits without invidious comparisons."

"It's miserable after Tarbubbles."

Nothing was seen of Verena on the actual day of removal. On going into her room in the morning Miss Tresidder found it stripped of everything save the heavy articles of furniture. Drawers and cupboards were empty, the crucifix above the bed had gone, leaving a bright outline on the faded paper.

"It looks like an hotel bedroom. What can she have done with her things?"

"Made an exchange for them, I shouldn't wonder," said Polly.

"It simplifies packing; I wish she'd folded the bedclothes as well."

"She's put her foot through the sheet, and tacked it together with black wool."

"One'd never imagine she could do that exquisite church embroidery."

"She's all for effect. Nobody but us'll see the torn sheet; lots of people will ask who sewed the golden crosses and bleeding hearts."

Sophy held the end of the bolster with her teeth as she extracted it from the case. Her voice sounded muffled as she answered: "There is that."

Throughout the day Duchar's van went back and forth taking the heavy furniture. In the interests of economy chairs, small tables and books were carried by Miss Tresidder, Victoria and Polly. By nightfall Flashers' End was tightly packed with massive and unsuitable furniture; Tarbubbles, desecrated and abandoned, awaited in uneasy silence the coming of the auctioneer.

In the new abode Miss Tresidder and Victoria had a supper of fried potatoes on the glass-topped tea-table which had progressed no further than the kitchen. A fire, recently lit, sent long tongues of flame up the cavernous black chimney; a tap dripping in the adjoining boiler was making an extending pool of rust on the hearthstone. Polly, her face magenta-coloured, dodged the leaping flames with the frying-pan.

Although the kitchen was lighted with the rosy glow of heat, the air clutched them with the chill of a newly opened sepulchre. Miss Tresidder took a Persian rug from the heap beside the door and put it under her feet.

"I wish the floor had been parquet as it was at Tarbubbles."

"There's no use repining," said Polly briskly.

"I'm not! These potatoes would be improved with a soupçon of pepper."

"The cruet is mislaid, but there is a speck of dried parsley in the tin by your elbow. I hope we shan't have vermin here."

"Whatever gives you such an awful idea?"

"Beetles are partial to stone floors."

"I wish you'd mentioned it before."

"What 'ud have been the good?"

They ate in silence for some minutes. Polly, as befitting a menial, sat apart, her plate supported on an inverted wash-tub.

Sophy addressed Victoria: "Did your Aunt Verena mention to you that she was going to be out all day?"

"No, but Gladys Dibb saw her early this morning walking towards the railway station between two nuns."

"The grocer's child doesn't sound a reliable girl. Doubtless she saw one of the visitors whom the nuns take in. Such unfair competition with the boarding-houses."

The fire burnt low. Polly put on some coal and a kettle. "I don't fancy the water out of that rusty boiler," she said.

Monstrous shadows jumped and swayed on the walls and cupboards; rafters seemed to twist and shake. A cold draught wafted the flames of the candles although the windows and doors were shut. Wax hung like icicles from the silver sconces, and wound about the candles in fantastic shapes.

Polly looked at them in awe: "Do you see the winding-sheets?"

"You give me the creeps. The strange house and Verena's absence has unnerved me. She's never been so late before. I hope she's remembered we're sleeping here —she may be trying to get in at Tarbubbles."

They waited until a clock struck eleven. Polly took a new candle which she lighted from the fire and went out into the blackness of the passage. The flame cast grotesque shadows of her head, fly-away cap, and the banisters upon the door.

"The post's been and brought a letter from Verena," she called back to the kitchen.

"Impossible!"

"Do you suppose I don't know her writing by this time, seeing I had her from the month?"

"Bring it in."

"There's plenty of time. Misfortune always comes fast enough, I've found."

Sophy tore open the envelope with less than her usual care. Her trembling fingers fumbled with the flimsy sheet of paper.

"They've got her—I knew they would. Taken her to France," she said in a suppressed voice.

"To make a nun of?" asked Polly.

"She's entering her novitiate—that's two years, I think. But you can't get them out."

"Like prison—I went once to see a cousin in jail."

"This is worse—far worse. Even if I can't do anything I'll write them a letter, saying exactly what I think."

"You were always a rare one for telling your mind!" said Polly admiringly.

BOOK THREE

I

VICTORIA gave the gate the bang and jolt that persuaded it to open in damp weather; she closed it gingerly and started to walk along the path which welcomed her feet with a familiar squelch of sodden moss. The usual gap in the parlour curtains allowed a slit of lamplight to escape across the garden, a breach which also gave Victoria a glimpse of Aunt Sophy knitting on the left of the fire, facing Polly Anker sitting darning in the draughty seat between the door and the small window overlooking the road. That Polly was there at all was a concession to the democratic ideas which had crept into society since the accession of King George, rather than Miss Tresidder's loneliness. The indulgence terminated each evening at five o'clock, when Victoria returned from her duties as assistant to Miss Carver.

On reaching the porch, Victoria turned to look at the garden. Rheumatic arms of ancient fruit-trees made an archway from the front door to the stream, a spreading oak growing in the hedge was etched against the twilight like a black lace fan; beyond, twinkling lights from the farm dotted the hilltop. She pondered upon her greater familiarity with the landscape's winter silhouette. The eight years which had elapsed since she left Tarbubbles remained in her memory as a sequence of cold winter mornings and wet winter nights, the latter predominating. Intervening summer days bore the same relation as

jam to gregory powder, and had impressed her as little.

She hesitated on the step for several minutes. February the nineteenth was marked upon the calendar at Flasher's End as a day of gloom; sorrowful memories would greet her entry and substantiate themselves in the wisp of crêpe looped around Verena's photograph.

Reluctantly she turned the knob.

Odours of hot paraffin and stewed kidneys swam towards her through the open door. Wedges of shadow slanted down the stairs, lamplight sliced the mysterious darkness of the passage; a bright circle, like a yellow balloon, was reflected upon the dusk of the ceiling.

"You're late!" Aunt Sophy called in querulous accusation from the parlour.

"I walked from half-way house."

"Whatever for?"

"Exercise."

"I suppose you're getting into trim in readiness for Colin's visit? Why he pretends to like tramping over the downs is puzzling. Artists and musicians generally avoid exertion."

Victoria hung her hat and coat on the banister and entered the sitting-room. Polly was kneeling before the fire, pouring water from a copper kettle into the teapot. Miss Tresidder was still knitting. The years at Flasher's End had robbed her of remaining youth. She had become thin and angular, her shoulders drooped. Thick veins stood out on the backs of her busy hands, a network of lines scored the pallor of her face and white streaks showed in her mouse-coloured hair, still dressed à la Pompadour.

She surveyed Victoria over the tops of steel spectacles.

"I don't care for your new coiffure, it's exaggerated and makes you resemble an actress on a picture post card."

"I must be growing beautiful," Victoria answered airily.

"Mrs. Macmullin deplores the change in you since Colin's visit from Dresden two years ago. Her eldest boy told her you were a cut between Lily Elsie and Pauline Chase since you discarded your eye-glasses."

"I'm glad he thinks so well of my appearance. Years ago I determined to be nice-looking."

"We have to accept the physiognomies given by the Almighty—we can neither make nor mar them. Your attitude towards young Macmullin's impertinent remarks only exemplifies the laxity of modern manners. In my youth I should have wept for shame had a young man likened me to actresses."

"The shame of one generation is the glory of the next."

"More shame to you for thinking so."

"Tea!" said Polly laconically. She clapped the cosy on as if it were an extinguisher, gave the spoons a final rattle, and left the room, to return no more to the amenities of the parlour.

Miss Tresidder sighed. Her eyes wandered to the photograph of Verena in its trappings of crêpe.

"Six years ago tonight my dear sister was hounded to her death."

"How old would she have been?" Victoria clumsily rejoined in her haste to introduce a more cheerful note.

"Only thirty-three." Miss Tresidder took off her spectacles to wipe her eyes. "I can see that female inquisitor standing over her dead body as if the scene were being re-enacted."

"So can I."

Unwillingly Victoria surrendered herself to the vision which her aunt conjured up on these grim anniversaries.

She relived the hurried departure from Flasher's End, the grey journey in the train, the misery endured between Southampton and Havre, the bleak coldness of France.

They had reached Angers in the frosty early morning. A few women wearing bunched-up woollen petticoats moved about the streets; scraggy chickens on tall stilt-like legs pecked in the gutters; shutters opened, receptacles were emptied from upper windows.

On the far side of the *Place du Marché* the walls of the convent garden rose like grey ramparts, pointed tops of young poplars showed above the coping, a wooden gate with an iron grille made a furtive entrance beneath a carved stone crucifix.

Miss Tresidder and Victoria climbed from the rickety vehicle which had brought them from the station. Aunt Sophy pulled the iron bell handle. A cracked tinkle came back feebly from the distance.

Icy wind blowing across the square caught their skirts and lapped them about their legs; it set the poplars whispering and nodding over the wall, like curious schoolgirls at the play.

An old crone passed pushing a cart containing a milk churn; a man in a white overall, carrying a tray of rolls on his head, called lustily as he went. From a high window in an opposite house a woman let down a basket. A boy put in a piece of meat, she pulled it up and shut the window with a bang.

Aunt Sophy again tugged the bell, so violently that it responded hysterically. After a while they heard steps shuffling towards them, and fingers fumbling at the door of the grille. It was opened grudgingly; an ancient woman's face appeared, strapped into a goffered *coiffe* and a dusty black veil.

"Qu'est-que c'est?"

"We are the relatives of Sister Mary Alphonsine," Miss Tresidder replied in halting French.

"Vous êtes de bonne heure," the lay sister crossly answered as she turned the key.

Miss Tresidder and Victoria found themselves in a long glass-roofed alley leading from the front door to the garden gate. The convent was a low straggling building surmounted by a belfry; additional pavilions were attached to the main block by covered walks. On either side wide lawns extended to the spiked high walls.

The old nun secured the door and let the massive key fall on its chain within the concealing folds of her habit. Mumbling, she beckoned them to follow.

The convent greeted them coldly. Ill-lighted passages scored with narrow apertures ran right and left. A huge wooden cross supporting a coloured plaster effigy of Our Lord faced the entrance; underneath was a deal table holding a visitors' book and an alms box.

The old woman marshalled them into the parlour. *"Je vais dire à Notre Mère Supérieure,"* she said and shut them in.

Beeswax and dampness suffocatingly closed upon them. The floor was polished like glass, nine shining pitchpine chairs stood against whitewashed walls which formed a negative background for the gilt-framed German oleographs of the Stations of the Cross. On a table in the centre was a square glass case containing a plush-robed waxen Madonna whose tinsel crown had fallen awry. She carried a shepherd's crook and a woolly lamb. A scroll at her feet proclaimed in Gothic lettering: *"Reine Céleste des Bergères."*

Miss Tresidder sat down by the door, Victoria looked

out through the window. Flakes of snow came floating down in a desultory manner; she marked one with her eye. After gliding indifferently it finally alighted on the sill, to be obliterated by another.

Snow fell faster and faster in a dazzling screen through which the poplars loomed grotesquely. Soon it lay thick enough to define uneven ground beyond the flatness of the lawn.

"What do you suppose those ridges are?" Victoria asked her aunt.

"I didn't see anything; it looked quite flat." Miss Tresidder rose and came to the window.

"There's a big cross in the centre; the mounds are beneath, all going one way like graves."

"They are graves."

For seeming hours they waited in the chill stuffiness of the parlour. So used had they become to the vigil that the entry of the Superior caught them unprepared.

"*Bon jour, Madame et Mademoiselle.*"

Miss Tresidder frigidly inclined her head. Victoria vexed herself by forgetfully making the stiff little bob in favour with Miss Carver as a morning salutation from her pupils.

La Mère Supérieure crossed herself and surveyed her visitors stonily. "Sœur Marie Alphonsine died this morning fortified by the Rites of Holy Church."

Miss Tresidder caught her niece's hand and gave it a convulsive squeeze. Victoria gently patted her shoulder, disappointed in the shallowness of her own feelings. Although profoundly shocked by Verena's death, she could not persuade herself that any vital assault had been made upon her sensibilities. She was ashamed of not quite rising to the occasion; whilst employing the gestures of emotion she retained the detached outlook of a specta-

tor. Her mind was intent upon trivialities, and recorded unimportant impressions with the exactness of a photograph. The heavy shading of black hair on the upper lip of the Superior, her chin which overlapped the tight white wrappings about her throat, and the purple pockets beneath the glittering black eyes she bent so unsympathetically upon Aunt Sophy were irrelevant facts noted by Victoria's wayward mind.

"What did she die of?" sobbed Miss Tresidder.

"Her malady was obscure. She received every attention, but Our Lord wanted her for Himself."

Whilst waiting, the hands of the nun monotonously told the beads of the rosary hanging from her girdle. They were curious hands, long and thin, with flexible tapering fingers ending in square, coarse, much-bitten nails.

"Sympathetic as I feel for your natural grief, Madame, I must remind you that the nature of my office makes many calls upon my time. As I would wish to lead you myself to our dear daughter, I must entreat you to tranquillize yourself."

"I appreciate your difficulty—I am also a busy woman," Miss Tresidder answered with surprising docility as she prepared to follow. The nun glided before them along a dark whitewashed passage that by its narrowness and lowness made her unusual height apparent. Bars of faded light came through tiny windows high up in the doorless cells on either side. As Victoria became accustomed to the gloom, she noticed a greasy mark of dirt shoulder high on the whitewash, a silent testimony to the passing of *les religieuses*. As they penetrated more deeply into the poorly ventilated building the smell of primitive sanitation, noticeable at the entrance, intensified.

The cell was bare save for the shelf-like bed of planks

and its ominous burden. With a remote air of detachment the nun bent over the pallet and folded back the white pall.

It was difficult to reconcile the ravaged face with Verena's. The cheeks were sunken in dark caverns, yellow skin was stretched so tightly over the cheek-bones that it shone like polished ivory, bistre shadows smeared the eyelids. A cheap bridal veil and wreath of artificial white roses worn by a novice at her *prise d'habit* accentuated the ghastly appearance of the dead face.

Sophy Tresidder looked down at her sister with growing horror. She drew back from the bed, whereupon the Superior, unmoved by emotion, rearranged the covering with gentle precision, before falling on her knees to pray with bent head and moving lips.

The faint click of falling beads and the distressed breathing of Miss Tresidder dominated the silent cell. Victoria thought of the many mornings the "*Clôche à cent coups*" had awakened Verena to its cold, unsympathetic walls. For the first time since entering the convent she noticed a personal possession. Verena's thick leather boots stood overlooked in the corner where she had left them. Curved and creased with toil, their red flannel tongues lolling derisively between straggling laces, they stood in the first position for a *pas seul*.

Miss Tresidder's breathing was becoming deeper and more aggressive. Victoria began to count imaginary seconds, as if it were necessary to measure the interval before the storm broke.

"Madam," Miss Tresidder said in nervous truculence, "I fear I must interrupt your prayers."

The nun, impervious to human wrath and the hardness of the stone floor, continued unmoved to pass the beads of her rosary through pliant fingers.

Purposefully Miss Tresidder returned to the pallet and once more pulled down the covering.

"She's emaciated, more like a skeleton than a young woman. But it shall not rest here—this community will learn that there is justice and retribution. I shall write to the Prime Minister and *The Times*."

The Superior rose quietly from her knees. Much practice had endowed the action with grace and dignity. She regarded Miss Tresidder with unruffled mien, as one far removed from petty worldly reprisals.

"*Deas vult*," she said dispassionately, and made the Sign of the Cross.

"It isn't His will, it's starvation and neglect!"

The nun ignored her shrill outburst. "*La pauvre*," she answered with mechanical compassion, "the dear God wanted her for Himself. He knew what was best."

She bent and rearranged the pall disturbed by Sophy's unruly hands.

In obedience to a powerful grim authority they found themselves once more in the dim passage, retracing their way helplessly to the polished chilly "*parloir*." At the door the Superior stood politely aside. Miss Tresidder and Victoria preceded her, both feeling at a disadvantage, vanquished by superlative subtlety.

"I have had tea prepared *à l'anglaise*. I fear you will find our weather inclement—especially after a fatiguing journey."

"We had everything we required at the station," Miss Tresidder replied untruthfully. "All that remains is to arrange for the removal of the body. Doubtless your experience of many similar tragedies will be invaluable in the present calamity."

"Tranquillize yourself, Madame! Sœur Marie Al-

phonsine will be laid in the cemetery within the precincts—you have no responsibility."

"No Tresidder has ever been interred in a nunnery," said Miss Tresidder firmly.

"Is that so? God is merciful. A vocation in a family is a very great grace and will doubtless be a blessing to you."

"There's no blessing in losing one's sister."

"The goal of a *religieuse* is death," said the nun calmly.

The same feeling of impotence against a superior force drove them from the convent and into the street. With a desolate heart Miss Tresidder heard the key turned and the lay sister's muttered *Ave Maria.*

"All the things I meant to say are unsaid, the brave deeds I planned are undone." She wrung her hands, her tears mingled with the whirling snow blowing across the square.

The old crone they had seen earlier in the morning came jogging towards them, pushing her empty churn. She paused at the convent gate, looked up at the crucifix, crossed herself, and, muttering a prayer, jogged on again through the snow.

"We'd better get back to the station—there may be a train," Victoria suggested dolorously.

They skirted the frowning wall and turned down a side street. Grey stone houses turned impenetrable faces upon them; the thick snow hushed their footsteps and enclosed them in a silence of mock serenity.

"There's the man who had the tray of rolls—it's empty now," said Victoria with fictitious cheerfulness.

"Quite empty!" Sophy agreed.

II

THE vigilance of a Medical Board had frustrated Colin Dallas in his design to leave the Service with a Greenwich Hospital pension: a misfortune which seemed likely to bind him indefinitely to an uncongenial occupation. When the timely death of Admiral Tresidder put him in possession of the last hundred pounds of his father's legacy, Colin lost no time in severing his connexion with the sea and commencing a musical education. He studied in Munich, Dresden and Leipzig, and by living frugally and giving violin lessons to the children of aspiring *bourgeoisie*, contrived five years of strenuous study. When in 1912 Doctor Balling offered him an engagement in the famous Hallé orchestra at Manchester, Colin felt that his foot was firmly set on the lowest rung of the ladder of fame.

As a violinist he convinced more by personality than technique. An assurance tinged with contempt for his audience impressed every one, save the most exacting, of his ability. He never read provincial papers, so it was vain for the musical critic of *The Manchester Guardian* to write: "The measure of Mr. Colin Dallas's ambition may be gauged by the programme of his violin recital in the Lesser Free Trade Hall, on Friday afternoon. Bach's *Chaconne*, Corelli's 'variations serieuses' (*La Folia*), Beethoven's *Romance in G*, Rameau's *Tambourin*, and last, but by no means least, Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*. It would be idle to pretend that his performance equalled his presumption. Mr. Dallas relies too much upon the personal element. He

dashes off his virtuosity with a peculiar and individual *élan* which is apt to bewilder and prevent the listener detecting weakness in technique, clarity and style. We understand that Mr. Dallas has abandoned the sea for a musical career, and would remind him that a performance which would be pleasing at a 'sing-song' is not good enough for Manchester."

After leaving the Navy, Colin's limited resources prevented him from visiting England until the summer of 1910, when he spent a dreary week in a boarding-house off the Tottenham Court Road before going down to Flasher's End.

He found that at eighteen Victoria had outgrown her childish plainness, but retained the aloof and strangely positive personality which had attracted him in her adolescence. Rather to his surprise, he found himself committed, after two days, to a love affair which he disliked only for its speed and the feeling that his prerogative had been usurped. He could not shake off the impression that the kisses he gave were in response to a demand, that he was as helpless as a fragment of steel in the attraction zone. Self-esteem desired the positions to be reserved. As the week went on this sensitive reaction was tempered by Victoria's illusive but determined charm. On his return to Germany the correspondence carried on for so many years was resumed with an added hint of intimacy, which by its vagueness was a further stimulus.

§

Victoria awakened on the morning fixed for Colin's week-end visit with the same thrill of excitement peculiar to the breathless intervals in a thunderstorm, when she balanced delicately on the edge of fear.

Something was going to happen at last. The drab procession of days, so alike that they merged together in a dull ribbon, was about to be interrupted and changed. Their successors might prove equally monotonous, but they would be built on a different pattern, and for a time at least would have the virtue of the unfamiliar.

Although Victoria was in love with Colin, she was not sanguine as to her chances of happiness, but his flagrant shortcomings only increased his attraction. His innocence of the evasions and deceptions which go so far to make the average individual on good terms with his own character made an appeal both touching and ingenuous.

Victoria got out of bed with less than her usual reluctance. The carpet, which had been part of the Wilton from the dining-room at Tarbubbles, welcomed her feet with friendly warmth. She crossed to the window and pulled the blind aside. The sun was shining with an intense clarity foreboding rain. Trees, shrubs, farm buildings and the rounded rim of the hill stood out individually, as if the sun had brought them forward out of a flat picture.

She let the blind fall again and commenced to dress in the dim light. Polly's heavy tread sounded from the room opposite. Her door opened, the stairs creakingly recorded her cautious descent. Presently a clattering of fire-irons and the wheezy creak and chirp of the pump-handle arose from the kitchen. Breakfast was being prepared.

Victoria's golden hair glittered responsively as she brushed it before the looking-glass which had belonged to Verena. A bleached patch on the woodwork was a memento of Doctor Toon's scent; a burn recorded Verena's clumsy attempts to ignite an incense-burner.

The mirror alone had discarded its allegiance, and reflected with pellucid obedience Victoria's childish round face.

On her way downstairs she looked into the tiny room over the front door prepared for Colin. Originally intended for Victoria, it retained many of the nursery characteristics cherished by Miss Tresidder for their memories. The doll's house and the butcher's shop lay face downwards on the top of the tiny wardrobe; a troop of Verena's wooden animals processed along the iron mantelshelf; a bundle of dolls lay slackly in the drawer of the dressing-table. These Victoria hastily collected and transferred to a bandbox in her room.

She had nearly finished breakfast when Miss Tresidder came down.

"You should have lighted the oil stove."

"It's only a palliative, and an indifferent one at that. If I can't have a fire, I'd rather be without its substitute."

"Well, I must have it; I can't stand the chill of this room so early in the morning." Sophy Tresidder hunted for matches. With contrition Victoria noticed how old and defeated she looked. No beckoning romance lured her along dangerous paths of adventure, no lover's kisses would send the blood pulsing through her veins. Life stretched drearily ahead, a long, lonely road punctuated by the cruel milestones of birthdays. Victoria impulsively jumped up, to throw a consoling arm round her aunt's bowed shoulders.

Miss Tresidder cringed with exaggerated apprehension. "You'll catch the button of your cuff in my hair-net —I wish you'd remember how fragile and expensive they are."

"I'm sorry." Feeling rebuffed, Victoria unhappily

sat down again. There seemed no way to span the gulf of loneliness surrounding each individual.

Miss Tresidder had found the matches. The lamp wick spluttered and sent up a spiral of smoke.

"The last can of oil has been most unsatisfactory."

"You went to a new man, didn't you?" Victoria responded in kindly curiosity.

"Yes, he was cheaper, but I shall buy no more from him."

"I shouldn't," said Victoria.

"I suppose you'll want a fire lighted for Colin? Men are generally supplied with comforts which women go without as a matter of course."

"It will only be for two mornings."

"It's not that I object to the cost so much as to the theory. We are told men are stronger and superior in every way. Yet one notices if there are not sufficient good things to go round, the man takes what is to be had, which contradicts both claims. Now my domestic dealings with men are over, it is a satisfaction that I indulged neither your grandfather nor your father."

Victoria was silent, recollecting the stern treatment meted out to the Admiral.

Miss Tresidder cut a round of brown bread and sat down to her frugal breakfast.

"I hope Colin will not behave to you as he did to Verena."

"He didn't do anything," Victoria indignantly retorted.

"That was just it—he didn't."

"Then you can't feel you've got a grievance against him."

"Of course I can. He'd no business to visit Tarbubbles unless he meant something. And Verena was

modest. You have forward present-day manners and are likely to make yourself cheap."

"There's nothing wrong in showing that you like a person."

"Nothing wrong, but it's imprudent, and will be counted up against you."

"Those ideas are Victorian."

"Maybe, but very sound. Men only respect women who know how to lead them on without giving anything in return. In Queen Victoria's reign young women were instructed in the proper way to do it."

Victoria, who had finished her breakfast, unhappily recalled her enthusiastic welcome to Colin's decorous advances. What she had taken for affection was doubtless curiosity and astonishment at forward behaviour. The sun which had been shining so brightly seemed to diminish in splendour, leaving the room a little colder and a little shabbier.

She said with scornful bravado: "The Victorians were supreme hypocrites."

"Perfect strategists would be a better definition. They took their time. The present generation want to get things too quickly, and end either by not getting them at all, or compromising with failure. The mtor-car has much to answer for."

"I don't see the connexion." Victoria's voice was superior.

"Speed," returned Aunt Sophy.

§

Victoria was on the platform ten minutes before Colin's train was due, an interval which allowed ample time for misgiving. During school hours she had been

able to thrust into the background qualms which Miss Tresidder's strictures had aroused, but now in the draughty echoing station they rushed down upon her more virulent by postponement.

She cringed beneath memories of kisses and caresses which had been offered almost before they were asked. Aunt Sophy was right. No really nice girl displayed her feelings, she kept them discreetly hidden and saved herself the pangs of mortification which bold avowal entailed. Somewhat belatedly Victoria determined to cultivate decorum and the cool manner which by some strange alchemy kindled the flame of love in the male breast. When at last the train steamed in, she carried herself with a prim deportment that would have done credit to the best Victorian traditions.

By travelling first class Colin discounted her calculations. She had a long embarrassing walk down the platform, peering up into third class carriages, colliding with hurrying passengers, only to be reminded when she saw Colin waiting by the bookstall that once again eagerness had betrayed her. She slackened her pace, and set her face in what she hoped was an expression of temperate welcome. Greetings were interrupted by the jostling of impatient travellers, polite sentences were commenced and abandoned. They joined the throng surging toward the exit.

A prey to the acute shyness which occasionally overwhelmed her, Victoria followed Colin through the barrier and stood waiting on the kerb whilst he crossed the yard to the cab rank. She watched a stranger who belied the familiarity which memory had conjured. She remembered his dark looks as a foil to comfortable British stolidity. How much of this impression had been due to

clothes and how much to reality? Did the familiar untidy tweeds conceal a foreigner, or did the foreign-looking black clothes he was now wearing hide an Englishman? She dismissed this last suggestion. No Englishman, especially one who had survived a Gunroom education, would wear an astrakhan collar to his coat, a black hat with a wide brim, or whiskers that made sleek bars down his cheeks. Pictures of troubadours, picadors, and gondoliers flitted confusedly through her mind and allied themselves with Colin as he leant against the east wind whistling through the railings of the station yard.

The cab creaked towards her and she climbed in. Colin carefully deposited his morocco suit-case on the floor and took the vacant seat beside her. The slam of the door seemed to marshal the complex emotions of the last week into a vibrating mass which fitted tightly about them.

They trundled down King Street towards the promenade without speaking. As they turned the corner they encountered a number of bluejackets, carrying coloured bundles, making their way to the station.

"Poor devils!" said Colin feelingly.

"They look quite happy." Victoria answered in a tone she imagined would be approved by Aunt Sophy, but which sounded smug in her own ears.

"That class knows nothing of happiness—they only react to drink and women."

Opinions so reassuringly familiar partially obliterated uneasy doubt. She stole a look, and was disconcerted to find Colin watching her. She felt herself blushing. Hoping to conceal embarrassment, she began to fiddle with her glove-button. Love was a malady to be avoided

—it made you uncertain of yourself and a fool in the sight of the beloved. Better, far, to jog along in a dull groove like Aunt Sophy, than to try to mount to the stars, only to fall ignominiously in the dust.

"You're going to cry," said Colin.

"I'm not."

"Then why are you keeping your eyes so wide open?"

"To see what's going on in the road."

"All the best people blink."

He put his arm round her and gathered her close. Her head rested weakly against his soft fur collar. Astrakhan, tobacco, brilliantine, and shaving soap made a mysterious, wholly masculine, blending of scents which rose giddily to her senses.

She made a wild clutch at decorous resolutions. "Nice girls don't allow themselves to be kissed in cabs," she heard herself saying.

"They're the only ones who get the opportunity."

Without his hat Colin lost much of the foreignness which made him so alarming. But his handsomeness was still rather terrifying. Victoria had an artist's awe of beauty. Perfection carved a gulf between itself and the prosaic—she never believed that Apollo mourned for Daphne.

They reached Flasher's End as dusk was creeping into the garden. Polly, a silhouette with outstretched arms, was coaxing the narrow curtains over the ridges of the bamboo rod; the red glow from the fire escaping into the garden changed the wisps of pale mist into rosy banners.

Victoria ran up the path ahead of Colin. She noticed that her footsteps were so light that the damp surface failed to record them in its wonted manner. Mind

evidently had a direct effect upon matter. Perhaps if one was sufficiently happy one could walk across the sea to France?

Miss Tresidder stood in the porch outlined against a yellow oblong of lamplight. She intended to instil into her welcome the reproach preserved for eight years, but, like Victoria, was so astonished by the guest's appearance that the carefully rehearsed speech was forgotten.

"Dear old Flasher's End!" said Colin affectedly as he crossed the threshold.

"You've only been here once," Miss Tresidder tartly rejoined. She watched him divest himself of his preposterous fur-trimmed coat, and wondered if he ought to be shown where the lavatory was, or if he would remember its inconvenient situation outside the back door. That was the difficult problem for the single woman entertaining male guests—to preserve decorum and yet see that the visitor's needs were provided for. Polly, who as a nurse was less squeamish, must be asked to undertake the awkward but essential explanation. For the moment the matter must be shelved. She opened the door into the parlour.

"You'll recognize many old friends from Tarbubbles," she said in a sprightly voice.

"Rather!" he responded enthusiastically.

A long silence supervened, quick with designs of unspoken conversations which each was too nervous to launch.

"It's much brighter here than in Manchester," Colin said at last. "The sun came out as I left Crewe."

"Do you find it colder in the North?" asked Miss Tresidder.

"It is and it isn't—it rains more and we get an awful

lot of fog—of course one gets used to it." He slipped a finger inside his collar and pulled at it as if it were too tight.

"And you have your profession."

"Quite!"

"You'd better begin to toast the muffins, Victoria—I can hear Polly lifting the lid off the kettle."

Colin turned to Victoria. "They make some quaint cakes in Manchester called pikelets—like circles of tripe toasted and buttered. You'll like them."

"I'm quite sure I shall," she warmly responded.

"We never go farther north than Shrewsbury," Miss Tresidder coldly observed.

After tea Colin strolled to the piano. It stood open with the "Peer Gynt" suite on the rack. Victoria did not know one note from another, and Sophy Tresidder had given up playing long ago, but she considered that Grieg gave a completed look to the instrument which otherwise had an uncomfortable resemblance to a coffin.

"Won't you play something?—we never hear any good music in Weymouth. That's what one misses so much. When my father and mother were alive we always went when in town to the concerts at the Queen's Hall."

"Really?" Colin's voice was bored.

He sat down to the piano and ran his fingers over the keys. He paused and thoughtfully tried a G in the bass. Just like Colin, Miss Tresidder reflected, to dwell on the only broken note in the piano . . . but his manners were always shocking. Aloud she said: "Won't you play us something of Sullivan's?"

"I don't know his works."

"He composed *The Lost Chord*," said Miss Tresidder in the hushed voice she reserved for sacred subjects.

Colin smiled. He leant over the keys, pressing them gently down with thin pale fingers, making a melody which he alone could hear.

How entirely foreign he looked in his black, tightly fitting suit, thought Miss Tresidder. He might be a dandy from a Continental city. One would never imagine he was the son of that rugged old salthorse, Jackie Dallas. But perhaps he *wasn't!* She dropped a stitch of her knitting. Pursing her lips, she pursued it with the needle.

III

MISS TRESIDDER received the announcement of Victoria's engagement with an incredulity that made the betrothed couple intensely uncomfortable.

"I suppose you wish to be congratulated?" she grudgingly asked.

"Only if you think the occasion warrants it," Colin sulkily retorted.

"One never knows. However, your blood is on your own head, and Victoria should have learnt wisdom by this time."

In aggrieved silence they sat down to a luncheon of hashed mutton. The clattering of knives and forks provided the only accompaniment to angry thoughts. Victoria, bordering on tears, made a pretence to eat; Colin, who disliked meat, gave up the polite deception when he discovered in his portion what appeared to be the animal's jugular vein. Miss Tresidder alone enjoyed her meal.

"Do they cater well at your boarding-house?" she asked as Polly entered.

"Adequately, but the cooking is erratic. The landlady is temperamental."

"How odd! Women of that class are usually phlegmatic, and they need to be, poor things, at the beck and call of any one."

Colin and Victoria went out in the afternoon and turned in the direction of the sea. Rain had fallen in the night and the road was sticky with pale mud. Victoria

picked her way carefully, Colin tramped indifferently through the puddles. His mouth was set in petulant curves, his brows met in a black line. He turned up the collar of his coat and made angry jabs at the hedge with his stick.

"One'd think I was committing a crime by marrying you, whereas I'm rescuing you from a drab life."

Victoria resented his remark and its suggestion of patronage. She answered haughtily: "I have a very interesting time."

"How do you make that out?"

"I have my work for one thing."

"Teaching a lot of ignorant brats!"

"They're not all stupid—one or two are quite intelligent."

"You can't convince me it is a congenial life for a girl of your temperament."

"There aren't many occupations open to women."

"Females weren't intended to work. They ought to remain at home cultivating charm, instead of squandering energy on tasks outside."

"Women should improve their minds!"

"Not at all! No man cares a damn if a girl is stupid so long as she's pretty and accessible."

A turn of the road showed them the bluff outline of Furzy Cliff, a strip of leaden sea, and Mr. Dibb's motor-boat drawn up on the shingle.

Although she was displeased with Colin's opinions, Victoria was determined not to show annoyance, so she said brightly: "Did you notice that the Dibbs have had Tarbubbles re-fronted? It is a copy of the Villa Pliniana —they spent their last holidays on Lake Como."

"Their type regard a visit to the Continent as a social

hall-mark. They scatter their beastly money everywhere and make the world impossible for refined tastes."

"I thought you considered the working man was entitled to equal rights with the aristocrat."

"A different matter! Travelling is a privilege."

"Mr. and Mrs. Dibb are better mannered than we are."

"That makes their offence worse—if they behaved naturally they might be less obnoxious."

By climbing a mound of stones Victoria gained the sea wall. Shingle lay level with the top, extended in billows far as the eye could see, and in some places cast itself over on to the road. A bit of wreckage lay on the beach in a twisted cross beside a beer bottle and some ends of rope; lying in a nest of seaweed and old boots was a dead collie with a flat-iron tied to its neck.

Victoria called down to Colin: "Why do people only drown collies?"

"They don't—they drown what they happen to have. Perhaps collies are mistakenly prolific."

"It's sad for dogs to be at the mercy of man."

"Worse for man to be at the mercy of his fellows."

They started to walk again. Victoria stepped carefully along the top of the wall, Colin splashed through the puddles on the road.

§

Their marriage was fixed for the following autumn. Victoria would have preferred a June wedding; Colin explained how impossible that would be. He had made definite plans to attend the centenary celebrations of Wagner's birth to be held at Bayreuth during May, afterwards he would go to Munich and Dresden. But he would be back by September, which was a more suitable

month for marriage. When she asked him why, he replied that the nights were getting longer. An answer which made her blush and meekly acquiesce in an arrangement she disliked.

As a rehearsal was fixed for Monday evening, Colin had to catch an early train back to Manchester. Due to an unpunctual breakfast and the dilatory behaviour of the cab, they reached the station as the guard unfurled his flag. The parting was speedy and perfunctory. In his anxiety to board the train Colin forgot that Victoria panted behind. But he remembered to wave as the train cleared the platform.

A fine drizzle was blowing up from the sea as she left the station. She gave a regretful thought to her umbrella, which, in the haste of departure, she had left in a corner of the dining-room. Her best hat would be spoilt, a misfortune which mattered less than if it had occurred on Saturday.

As she walked down King Street she tried to disregard the persistent sense of disappointment lurking at the back of her mind. The disillusionment was too vague to take active shape—doubtless it arose from her foolish practice of visualizing happiness in advance, of making mental pictures brighter than reality. Sensible persons took what came, and were content because they had nothing with which to make comparison. And she had little to complain of—Colin had proved himself superior to her hopes; also he did not share Aunt Sophy's views upon feminine behaviour, or appear aware of the many times it had been transgressed.

The day which had started early was unusually tedious; the class she instructed was determinedly intolerant of the dry facts she submitted. Believing that the Sunday

rest had a vitalizing effect upon intelligence, Miss Carver counteracted it on Monday with a blast of learning that stupefied her pupils and exasperated her assistant.

By the afternoon Victoria had a headache which the drive home in the teeth of an icy wind accentuated. In climbing from the cart she slipped and twisted her ankle; separate jabs of pain darted through her as she limped up the familiar path to the house. She fumbled in the dark for the door knob, and having found it impatiently turned it until it acknowledged the faulty latch.

Blending with predominating smells of paraffin and brussels sprouts were lesser odours of roast chicken and bread sauce. She frowned angrily. At Flasher's End fowls were inseparably associated with birthday, Christmas and Trafalgar Day celebrations. Poultry on an ordinary week-night could only be taken as a subtle form of forgiveness. Through the agency of roast chicken Miss Tresidder intimated that discord occasioned by Colin's visit was at an end.

As Victoria wiped her feet on the mat, Miss Tresidder appeared at the parlour door clutching an old red crochet shawl about her shoulders. Shortsightedly she peered up at the fanlight and said amiably: "It seems a nice moonlight evening—I was afraid it might rain, as you forgot your umbrella."

Victoria truculently retorted: "It did rain—the feather in my hat is ruined."

"What a pity—but trimmed hats are hardly suitable for working days. Mrs. Macmullin, who has to be out in all weathers, finds a hard black felt most serviceable. I'll get you one for next winter—it's scarcely worth while this year."

"You needn't trouble—I shan't be here," Victoria curtly answered.

"I expect you will be," came the indulgent reply.

They went into the parlour. Victoria crossed to the fire and knelt on the rug. Although she was so cold her head was burning, she leant it against the marble mantelpiece which gave back hard icy comfort. Miss Tresidder inspected the supper table laid there for warmth, instead of in the chilly dining-room. She rearranged the spoons and forks placed by Polly, and polished the glasses with a duster taken from the table drawer.

Victoria, brooding upon her wrongs, broke out angrily: "Colin told you last night that we have decided to be married in September, so I can't understand why you ignore the idea of change."

"It's a pity you take the affair seriously—nothing will come of it. In six months Colin will be attracted by some other girl. For your own sake you'd do well to regard it as a flirtation brought about by your provocative behaviour."

"You take exception to my manners, but I think they're much the same as other people's."

"I'm not criticizing for the sake of doing so, but recommending you to be cautious for your own good." Sophy Tresidder spoke in an injured voice. "Verena's end should be a warning."

"In what way?"

"Colin's callous attitude indirectly caused her death; but for him she would never have become involved in the Roman Catholic religion. I confess I have been shocked at your forgetfulness of Verena—it's almost like stealing another woman's fiancé."

"I remember you advising Verena not to harbour foolish fancies about Colin, and when she became hysteri-

cal, trying to divert her attention as you would a child's."

Miss Tresidder compressed her lips, a look of pained resignation crossed her face. She sat down at the table, picked up the carving knife and tested it against her thumb. She started to sharpen it on the steel, drawing it slowly up and down in lacerating squeaks. At each sweep the ends of her red shawl flapped awkwardly over her elbows, making her look pathetically old and ineffectual.

§

Unwaveringly pursuing her policy of disbelief, Miss Tresidder was indulgent to her niece and ostentatiously humoured her, as a nurse might pander to the whim of a feverish invalid. Such scepticism infuriated and alarmed. It gave shape to Victoria's own feelings of insecurity and coloured her days with doubt. In retaliation she fell back upon the secretive tactics to which she invariably resorted in times of stress. The barrier of chilly politeness which she erected around herself had its effect. Miss Tresidder's assurance began to wane, a look of fear crept into her eyes, she tried to propitiate Victoria with small gifts and humble offers of help. They watched one another closely, each waiting for a sign of capitulation from the other.

In March Victoria gave in her notice to Miss Carver, a definite act which gave reality to a future daily becoming more dreamlike and fantastic.

Colin's letters, which had always been discursive rather than affectionate, did not alter their character. Intermittently they came as before, and read like safety-valves for reactionary opinions rather than expressions of love. About a month after his return to Manchester he sent her a brown scarab set in a twisted ring of gold

wire. No explanation came with the battered pith box containing it. Assuming the gift to be an engagement ring, Victoria had the sharp ends filed down and wore it on the orthodox finger. When Miss Tresidder saw the ring she pulled down the corners of her mouth expressively, but refrained from comment.

Expecting Colin to come to Weymouth at the end of the winter concert season, Victoria's disappointment was great when he made no suggestion of seeing her before he left for Germany in April. She conveyed her displeasure by leaving his letters unanswered, a stratagem which passed unnoticed; he continued to ventilate his opinions on post cards and scrappy pieces of paper. Just before his departure he surprised her by sending a bale of cambric with the suggestion that it would do to make chemises for her trousseau. He added casually that he had engaged a double bedroom at his boarding-house from October, which would save the expense of furnishing and the trouble of housekeeping. An address in Bayreuth was added in a postscript with the reminder that foreign postage was twopence-halfpenny.

These concrete arrangements with their lack of romance chilled and alarmed Victoria. To restore flagging confidence she fell back upon the doubtful aid of imagination. Where Colin failed she supplied his deficiency out of the bounty of her mind, weaving satisfying pictures in which tenderness and sympathy replaced a devastating lack of perception.

IV

INSTEAD of returning to England at the beginning of September, Colin accepted an invitation to Leipzig from the German tenor, Heinrich Krumm, where he became so engrossed in composing a symphony that he forgot how closely his marriage was approaching. Peremptory orders from Doctor Balling at last brought him home. He went straight to Manchester to rehearse for the Wagner commemoration concert to be given by the Hallé Society on the second of October. Thus the arrangements for the wedding fell to Victoria, who unfortunately decided to be married on the tenth of October—a Friday. Superstitious Polly denounced the day as ill-omened, a belief verified by the second concert of the Hallé season taking place on the ninth. Colin caught a slow night train from Manchester and arrived at Flasher's End jaded and bad tempered early on the wedding morning.

Breakfast was laid for him on the desk in the dining-room window, as the table was already prepared for the bridal feast. Smilax festooned the starched folds of a Naval tablecloth; pink carnations sprouted stiffly from trumpet-shaped silver vases; the best Coalport tea and coffee cups and saucers were lined up in separate companies. The cake, the gift of Aunt Sophy, topped by a hired plaster ornament upholding artificial orange-blossoms, frowned coldly upon the bride and bridegroom as they greeted each other with the perfunctory kisses of the morning.

"I hope there's something to eat, or must I wait till we're married?" Colin looked apprehensively at the cake.

Victoria's eyes were also attracted by the sugar monument. She shivered slightly.

"Polly's frying bacon and eggs."

They gazed at each other blankly—there seemed nothing to say. The interval resembled the last minutes preceding the departure of a train, when farewells have been exchanged and eyes are riveted anxiously on the station clock.

She noticed Colin's suit was grey with dust, that his chin was covered with black stubble. Revulsion swept her, quickly to be followed by loving dismay when she noticed how weary were his eyes.

"You look so tired, as if you'd been watch-keeping for nights and nights."

For answer he gathered her into his arms and sank upon the big chair by the fireplace. He held her absently, as if too tired for caresses. She rubbed her cheek gently against his face. By rasping her skin she tried to atone for that fleeting disgust.

"Are you very weary?"

"Exhausted. I've been rehearsing for one damned concert or another ever since I got back—at night I practise on my own account."

"Poor darling, it sounds so lonely."

"Oh, no. There's a little Armenian at the boarding-house who plays the piano admirably and doesn't mind going on until the small hours. He has the best sitting-room and a Blüthner, besides a wife like the cover of a fourpenny magazine."

"I shan't allow you to work so hard after to-day."

"You won't be asked."

To soften his answer Colin gave her an absent-minded kiss, which missed its mark and landed on the side of her nose. She wriggled out of his encircling arm and stood up. The whole room seemed to vibrate with discords that thickened and substantiated themselves in a wedding cake, symbol of intimate promise that looked indecent at eight o'clock in the morning. She turned to Colin and found him watching her with miserable eyes. Seeking comfort, she dumbly extended her hands. They clung together like children who suddenly realize they are lost in a great dark void.

"Will it always be so frightening?" she asked.

"We shall forget. It's only when something revolutionary happens that we remember. Habit fosters a false sense of security. If a man catches the same train at the same time every day for years, he feels himself part of the universal system, indestructible as dawn. Break the custom and he becomes a lost speck in a vast wilderness."

"But that hasn't anything to do with us getting married," Victoria objected miserably.

"It has—we're standing in a hiatus between old habits and others yet to be formed. As we get into the new groove you'll feel secure again."

"I hope so."

Colin frowned upon the decorated table. "And all this paraphernalia has unnerved you. Marriage should be a gradual merging of love into fulfilment, not a public ceremony overshadowed by a sugar casemate."

For a long time they looked at the wedding cake, thinking separate thoughts.

The kitchen door opened, releasing the excited sounds

of spluttering fat and the rattle of plates. Polly's steps were heard in the passage.

"Your breakfast's coming," said Victoria.

"Thank God!"

§

As Victoria changed into the white crêpe-de-Chine dress in which she was to be married she could hear Colin splashing on the other side of the lath-and-plaster partition. She supposed she had heard the same sound on other occasions; this time it was a reminder that soon no wall would be there. She was bewildered by the complexity of her emotions, drawn and yet repelled by the thought of marriage. In a panic she looked round the austere small room and at her narrow bed. Never again would she be able to call any room quite her own, or have the right to turn the key upon intruders. She wondered if this aspect of marriage was alarming Colin?

She heard the mechanical clicking of a safety razor, the quick opening and shutting of a trunk and an exclamation of annoyance. Evidently he was undaunted by future problems.

Suddenly the tiny room changed from a refuge into a cage imprisoning her within other cages occupied by strange people intent on strange acts. Her excited state magnified noises of common occurrence into thunderous sounds of mysterious origin. She felt terrified. Aunt Sophy, Polly, Colin, became alien and aloof, like friends distorted by a nightmare. She cowered upon the bed and buried her face in the pillow, regardless alike of her dress and the tulle veil pinned to her hair.

Miss Tresidder's door opened. Silence ensued, fol-

lowed by spasmodic creaking of the floor-boards as they recorded her furtive progress down the passage. Victoria rose and hurried to the glass as a scuffling knock sounded on the door. "Come in!" she called nonchalantly.

Aunt Sophy was in difficulties with her dress, which hooked down the back. Discarding a scarf, a modest precaution against a possible encounter with Colin, she exposed a gap and a tight calico bodice.

"You want me to do you up?" Victoria hazarded with returning composure.

Hooks and eyes snapped into their places like a benediction; a dog barked on the road and a cart rumbled past. Once more the great loneliness was filled with homely sounds. Fear receded into the shadowy spaces outside the circle of safe, familiar things.

Miss Tresidder regarded her with a puzzled expression. "You looked so odd when I came in—I suppose it's the veil. And it's not quite straight, dear. I wish it didn't remind me so forcibly of poor Verena."

"You insisted on my wearing one. I should have preferred my hair uncovered."

"In that case Mr. Macmullin wouldn't have married you. Women are forbidden to enter a church bareheaded. It's such a pity that as a child you took so little interest in religion. Had you done so you would know all about ecclesiastical etiquette."

"I dare say," Victoria returned indifferently.

Miss Tresidder looked pained, and started to arrange her niece's bridal veil in what she deemed a becoming and decorous fashion. To this end she flattened Victoria's hair at the sides and hid it under the folds of tulle.

Victoria looked at herself. "I'm like Gladys Dibb

after she caught ringworm on a holiday at Blackpool."

"You look very nice."

"I'm not pretty bereft of hair." She went back to the glass and pulled off the veil. Looking grieved, Sophy opened the bedroom door. "You won't have much time," she admonished; "the motor was at the gate as I came along."

Colin, nervous and unhappy in a morning coat and striped trousers of foreign cut, was standing in the hall when Victoria came downstairs. Miss Tresidder, holding a Prayer Book in white kid-gloved hands, sat on the edge of a chair within the parlour door. Polly, resplendent in plum-coloured cloth, hovered solicitously near the kitchen.

"There you are, and sweet you look, to be sure. Just to think you should be the only bride out of all the children I've nursed!"

"Had Miss Verena lived, you'd have seen her married, and to a suitable husband."

"I understood your sister was a *religeuse?*" Colin darted a baleful glance at Miss Tresidder.

"She was not always a nun, as you must remember."

"I don't recollect much about her." His tone was uninterested.

Victoria broke in nervously: "Oughtn't we to be going?"

"Colin's cab hasn't come yet."

"I didn't order one."

Miss Tresidder raised her eyebrows. "Then you'll have to come with us. Naturally we thought you'd arrange about a vehicle at the station, and be ready at the church to receive Victoria." She shrugged her shoulders and led the way out of the house. Colin followed

sulkily. Victoria had to wait whilst Polly, who held her veil, turned the key with her free hand.

They stood on the footpath whilst Victoria climbed into the hired motor. Polly lapped the bridal skirts about her, Miss Tresidder pulled down the tulle veil, and took the vacant place, leaving the opposite seat for Colin and Polly.

The car sped swiftly down the road towards Tarbubbles and round the bend to the straight mile. In passing, they caught a glimpse of the Dibb family on the beach under Furzy Cliff, preparing to go picnicking in their motor-launch: Gladys in a pink frock hanging on to the arm of the Assistant-Paymaster to whom she had recently become engaged.

"Fancy that common little chit marrying even an A.P!" said Miss Tresidder.

Colin answered with irritation: "It's not difficult."

Victoria's draperies took up so much room he was afraid to move his feet. He sat uncomfortably, feeling like a trussed fowl. What a fool he'd been not to order a taxi for himself . . . instead of driving in this ignominious fashion with a party of women! And Polly was fat and hot . . . her thigh was like a poultice. He wriggled uncomfortably and dropped his hat on Miss Tresidder's feet. "Sorry," he said, stooping to recover it. He restored it to his knees. The last time he wore it was at Carl Kühmstedt's marriage to the weighty soprano singing at the *Gewandhaus* in Leipzig. Somebody had poured a bottle of champagne into his hat . . . the stain was still discernible. He looked at Victoria, drooping in the opposite seat . . . the veil made her resemble a collapsing meat-safe. Getting spliced in an orthodox way

was a beastly business . . . as to the drive it was like a jaunt in a tumbril. . . .

They reached the church.

A few maidservants and perambulators clustered at the gate; the curator, in a black gown, waited in the porch, surrounded by a number of sightly dirty children whom Colin recognized as younger members of the Macmullin tribe.

Polly and Miss Tresidder hastily alighted and extended helpful hands to Victoria. He was made to feel remiss, like a little boy who has forgotten his manners. Purposefully he lagged behind, assuming a *blasé* air which he did not feel. In the porch the two women hovered emotionally, arranging the bride's bouquet, spreading out her skirt into a fan-shaped tail on the dirty red baize. With an exaggerated start Miss Tresidder recollected him. She took him by the arm and manœuvred him past Victoria. "There," she whispered, "walk up the aisle and wait by young Macmullin—then nobody'll guess we've come together."

He found himself following the flapping skirt of the curator towards his unknown best-man, Seneca Macmullin, standing at the chancel steps. Helplessly Colin looked round for somewhere to put his hat. Young Macmullin took it and laid it on the floor. "Good egg," he said in a cheerful undertone of encouragement, "oh, *good egg!*"

Miss Tresidder and Polly were coming up the aisle. Polly sidled into a seat near the door, Miss Tresidder advanced to the front pew and fell on her knees. Agitation shook the guests. They craned their necks to look at Victoria, standing like a timid wraith within the door.

The din of the organ surged through the church. An old gentleman with wayward legs had appeared from nowhere and was arming Victoria up the strip of baize.

"Sir Thomas Tresidder, staying at the 'Gloucester,' " whispered Seneca.

Colin discovered himself standing beside Victoria, gazing fixedly at a darn in Mr. Macmullin's surplice.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here . . ."

§

It was over. The prescribed ceremonies had been complied with; the bride and bridegroom were once more in the motor driving from Flasher's End. After surviving the day with apparent composure Victoria collapsed tearfully in her corner; the parting with Aunt Sophy had proved itself the supreme ordeal. She was so much more distressed than Victoria expected; her farewell was bestowed with the stony renunciation of a death-bed parting.

Still harbouring resentment for the indignities heaped upon him in this business of getting married, Colin looked at his bride doubtfully. He ought to have been firmer, not to have allowed a pack of women to take their bits between their teeth, so to speak. Had he fixed things up in his own time with a Manchester registrar, he'd have saved himself a loathsome night in a slow train and an arrival gritty with travel, a condition that was still unremedied by a bath. From the first he'd been rushed . . . forced to run when he wished to walk. . . . Victoria was very sweet, but she had not been reluctant with her kisses . . . no doubt women arranged marriages. . . .

Compunction seized him as he watched her. She looked forlorn and frightened . . . unlike a calculating

general triumphing in victory. Indiscreet advances were but the outcome of passionate affection? The thought was mollifying and softened recollections of an inglorious day.

He drew her into his arms and cradled her against his shoulder. The abandonment of her slender body increased his clemency.

"Don't cry," he murmured. "The beastly day's over; we're going to forget about it and think only of exciting adventures ahead."

She pressed closely to him, and said incoherently: "Please promise never to stop loving me—make me feel I belong somewhere."

"You foolish child—of course I'll always love you."

V

BECAUSE it was within easy reach of Weymouth and had a through-train service to Manchester, the honeymoon was spent at Bournemouth. Victoria expected romance to cast a spell over the days and make them uniformly gay. She was unprepared for long stretches of boredom. Living with Colin was like swinging between the Equator and the Poles. At moments he needed her urgently, then did not want her at all. Characteristically he made no attempt to bridge the gaps with polite attentions.

Neither he nor Victoria cared for the fashionable watering-place with its flat seaboard, spidery-legged piers, and indifferent concert parties; both were glad that his engagements limited the honeymoon to five days.

They reached Manchester as dusk settled prematurely on the city. Following their luggage down the platform, they met the rush of home-bound workers surging towards suburban trains. As they recognized Colin, girls nudged each other and cast envious glances at Victoria.

Outside the station, where brightly lighted shops fought the yellow gloom, the racket was bewildering; on the pavements pale-faced, determined people jostled and thrust each other into the road. Lorries stacked with bales of raw cotton rumbled over the setts; motors and vans steered eccentric courses, small electric trams wobbled round a bronze Queen Victoria marooned amidst the traffic on a corroded marble throne.

So much industry leavened by so little joy oppressed Victoria.

"The people are very harassed and pale."

"They are a bit jaundiced."

The taxi sped up Portland Street. Stately black warehouses towered into the flat yellow sky; street lamps, like tarnished gold beads, zigzagged into the distance; tramcars full of swaying people rollicked tipsily along silver rails.

"These warehouses are principally owned by Greeks and Jews."

"I wonder why?" Victoria answered vaguely, thinking of the girls in the crowded station who had glanced so eagerly at Colin. Impulsively she put out her hand; he did not respond, and it fell on the surface of the leather upholstery, which struck cold like a snub.

They whisked round a corner and ran through a region of dingy shops selling second-hand clothes; fish and porter; theatrical costumes; others slyly displaying obscure drugs, rubber appliances, and sex literature. A black canal oozing between a cañon of tall factories showed between a gap in the houses; it dived under the road and reappeared on the other side like an open sewer.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Victoria.

"Manchester is unique. You'll get used to it. Only new-comers see anything amiss."

Shops became meaner but more respectable. A Georgian church in a cloak of soot stood surrounded by sunken mausoleums and tombstones that slanted towards each other like convivial cronies. They passed two hospitals and a treeless park planted with neat beds of geraniums and lobelias.

"We shan't live here long, shall we?"

"My dear child, nobody remains! But every ambitious performer must serve an apprenticeship in this artistic city."

"Couldn't you achieve fame elsewhere?"

"Never! Serious artists are always discovered in Manchester."

Their taxi turned into "The Park." Silence met them like a padded wall. Mansions in diverse suits of paint stood in stately detachment round a railed oasis of rhododendrons; clumps of evergreens wilted within private enclosures separated from the communal drive by dumpy posts and slack chains.

The cab drew up at a soot-blackened portico.

"Here we are!" said Colin.

§

At ten o'clock the following morning Victoria was sitting up in bed finishing her breakfast. Colin, who had to be at The Free Trade Hall in time for a ten o'clock rehearsal, had been absorbed at an early hour into the fog that banked itself against the windows like billows of dirty cotton-wool.

As she drank her last cup of tea she tried to marshal impressions of the previous night from the confusion in her mind. Mr. Fussell's beard, so like a tousle of rusty horsehair, tangled itself with a memory of Mr. Costobadian's brilliantined curls. Mrs. Fussell's false teeth had a separate entity and smiled expansively without a face; Mrs. Pratt, sallow, eager and restless, with a tumbling bun of black hair, wore a velveteen mediæval dress which somehow associated itself with the ghost of Lady Macbeth. And they all looked like refugees camping with their furniture in an abandoned palace.

The mansions in Victoria Park had come down in the world. Number Three still displayed the lavish decoration of the 'fifties. Mirrors made deceptive vistas on staircases and over mantelpieces; stucco scrollwork embellished walls and ceilings in patterns of tarnished gilt.

The green and gold of Victoria's bedroom was subdued by half a century's soot to the dingy hue of dried sage. A handsome lustre chandelier made a dusty setting for a bent gas pipe and incandescent burner. A glass above the mantelpiece spottily reflected the windows, Nottingham lace curtains, gilded pediments, and the yellow fog without. On the polished floor a drugget made a small grey-and-pink island; an Austrian oak suite of furniture stood against the walls. Music, battered uniform cases and a hair trunk (once the property of Colin's Italian mother) were stacked on a marble pier-table; the bride's new box of compressed cane stood in superior isolation at the foot of the bed.

A knock sounded on the door. Victoria took a lace cap from the bed-post and hastily put it on.

"Come in!" she cried.

Colin was apt when he likened Mrs. Costobadian to the cover of a magazine. Large china-blue eyes gazed vacantly from a pink and white face, a bow-shaped red mouth was perpetually open, showing brittle even teeth. She looked amiable, insipid and artificial; grisly reality only showed itself on her chalk-white throat, puckered and scarred by the surgeon's knife. Jewelled tortoise-shell pins secured elaborately swathed yellow hair; her nose was nicely powdered. She held together a scanty silk wrapper with a complacent gesture that emphasized her condition; in her free hand was a nail polisher and a jar of manicure cream.

Her accent was genteel. "I hope you will pardon the unconventionality of a bedroom call, but as the gentlemen aren't here I thought we could waive ceremony for once."

"Quite," said Victoria. "Won't you pull a chair up to the fire?"

"Thanks, ever so." Mrs. Costobadian settled herself comfortably and put her satin-shod feet on the fender. "I think these gas fires never throw out heat in the same way as coal does. My husband's just had a sweet pink-tiled fireplace put in our room; he says it will encourage me when I'm having baby. Did you know we have a suite with a separate bathroom?"

"Really?"

"It's ever so nice. We have our meals privately or downstairs as we feel inclined. Just now I'm not always equal to meeting people—Paul says it comes of being so sensitive—I'm ever so temperamental. You'd hardly believe it, but I came over quite faint the other night when Mr. Fussell drank pea-soup."

"Beards are difficult to circumvent."

"And of course the Fussells are rather unrefined. Perhaps it comes through living amongst heathens. They're missionaries in China and only came home to have Franko's tonsils removed."

"Their little boy?"

"Yes, and he hasn't had the operation yet—Mr. Pratt is giving him treatment."

"So our landlord is a doctor?"

"Not with a brass plate, but he's ever so clever. Mr. Pratt was a chemist at Cheetham Hill until he made a mistake over some morphia and was struck off the register. Mrs. Pratt retired from the stage when she married—she

was leading lady in a touring Shakespearian company—so when Mr. Pratt was so badly treated she tried to get on again, and Mr. Pratt went out to India, where he'd always wanted to go but had not been able to on account of business. Mrs. Pratt found she didn't like the stage so much when she got back on to it, so she took this boarding-house. After Mr. Pratt had learnt the Secrets of the Fakirs out in India he came home and joined her. So now he treats illnesses with the forces of light, as well as making a mystic cough cure. When it's not too foggy you'll see pedlars coming in the early morning to fetch the cough cure. Pratt's Cosmic Capsules have ever such a good reputation round Longsight and Old Trafford."

"How interesting!"

As she watched Mrs. Costobadian polishing her nails with a silver-mounted buffer, Victoria wondered how long the visit was to last. Feeling rather shocked, as if she had retrogressed in manners, she sat up stiffly in bed and tried to look as if she were properly dressed.

Mrs. Costobadian placidly continued: "I thought it better for us to become acquainted at once because to-night Paul is taking us both in a car to the Free Trade Hall. When the concert's over we're calling for your husband at the artists' entrance—we always make a point of fetching him, especially on Symphony nights."

"That's very kind."

"Paul's ever so fond of your husband, and thinks he's a wonderful violinist. Of course I don't claim to be musical, not really musical, that is. Give me something melodious, like 'Gipsy Love.' "

"I can't appreciate classical music either."

Mrs. Costobadian looked offended. "Of course I understand music: what I mean to say is that I prefer something with a tune. . . ."

§

Mrs. Costobadian's protracted call made Victoria late for luncheon. When she entered the dining-room Mrs. Pratt had already served Mr. and Mrs. Fussell with minced chicken; Franko, elevated on cushions and protected by a soiled bib, was clumsily feeding himself with bread and gravy. He was a pale, weedy little boy wearing a plum-coloured knitted jersey and inadequately buttoned knickers to match.

Mrs. Fussell greeted Victoria with a welcoming exposure of teeth; Mrs. Pratt waved a spoon in vague salutation; Mr. Fussell rubbed his hands, smacked his lips, and said it was a foggy morning.

"It is very dark," Victoria agreed.

"You haven't noticed Franko yet." Mrs. Fussell nudged her son. "Go and kiss the pretty bride, darling."

"Don't want." Franko stuffed his mouth with soaked bread.

"Oh, naughty! Of course you'll give her a lovely kiss."

Victoria firmly excused herself: "It would be safer if he didn't—I think I've caught a cold."

"Then perhaps he'd better not—Franko's so liable to catarrh."

"But I observe an improvement." Mrs. Pratt looked about for a fork, and failing to see one, took a spoon instead. Resentfully she looked at the plates of the absent boarders which made a clattering pile beneath her own. She did not move them and started to eat her meal with a resigned expression.

"Isn't the Professor joining us?" asked Mr. Fussell.

"No—no, I think not. He's in the laboratory doing something with forces and atoms."

"He has remarkable powers," said Mrs. Fussell. "Franko becomes quite galvanized as the Professor approaches, and the child's not easily influenced."

Mrs. Pratt replied in a sprightly tone: "It takes seven years."

"A cure?" Mrs. Fussell sounded apprehensive.

"Oh no, just to learn the Secrets of the East."

"I don't altogether hold with magic," Mr. Fussell said portentously, "and we don't need to go to India for occult practices. We come across plenty in China."

"But India is British, which puts quite a different complexion upon sorcery," Mrs. Pratt answered soothingly, and turned to Victoria: "Have you travelled in the East?"

"No, have you?"

"Only in fancy."

Mr. Fussell looked sternly over the tops of steel-framed pince-nez. "You can't fancy China."

"I can fancy anything," Mrs. Pratt proudly asserted.

§

Mrs. Costobadian invited Victoria to a repast of cakes and coffee before leaving for the concert. Victoria arrived too early and had to wait for some minutes whilst her hostess finished dressing.

The Costobadians' sitting-room was decorated with a degree of elegance that put to shame the dilapidated splendours of other parts of the house. The cupids and garlands on the walls had been newly painted in natural colours against a background of clouds. Pink silk curtains matched a thick oval carpet and expensive floor cushions. A silvered fender and a grey-tiled fireplace

made a setting for Dresden candlesticks on the mantelpiece. China shepherdesses simpered through the glass doors of a satinwood cabinet; a grand piano, bereft of ornaments, stood nakedly in a corner. Several arm-chairs and a divan stood invitingly about the room; a table covered with a lace cloth held sandwiches and a bewildering array of cakes.

Mr. Costobadian, who was ready first, was most apologetic. The guest had been kept waiting.

"But my Florry couldn't decide which dress to wear. First it was pink, zen it was blue, and now it is green, and zey all hook down ze backs."

"She is lucky to have a husband who can fasten them," said Victoria sympathetically.

"I am deft with ze fingers. Now I will make ze coffee as we make it in Erzerum." He turned to the table and lit a lamp beneath a peculiar coffee-pot of brass.

Evening dress was not kind to Mr. Costobadian. His plump curves were accentuated, his coat-tails hung at an angle they were never intended to assume, his shirt front curved like a *prima donna's* bosom.

He looked at Victoria with soft, kind, melancholy eyes. "It will be a happy night for you, hearing for ze first time your husband playing in ze big public hall?"

"I've never heard him play properly—only fragments of things."

"Zen you have much joy ahead. He's a great artist, not appreciated yet, but ze time will come. All ze while his genius is developing, I hear ze advance as I accompany him on ze pianoforte."

Victoria was saved a reply by Mrs. Costobadian's voice

calling from the adjoining room: "Take my cloak and warm it before the fire, Paul. The Free Trade Hall is ever so chilly, and I don't want to catch cold. Why they don't make it cosy like the Theatre Royal I can't think."

"Upholstery would interfere with ze acoustics, my beloved."

He brought an ermine cloak and spread it over a chair before the fire.

Mrs. Costobadian, in a dress of apple-green velvet, greeted Victoria with languid pleasure. "I'm ever so glad we're going together. When my husband gets wrapped up in the music, he forgets all about me."

"I never forget you, my beloved," said Mr. Costobadian reproachfully.

"Last Thursday, when I asked you to fetch an extra wrap from the cloak-room, you didn't get it."

"But zen you asked me in ze middle of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony."

Wearing a peevish expression Mrs. Costobadian trailed over to the table. "I hope you'll have something to eat, Mrs. Dallas. Try some *Zimmtkuchen* or *Gugelhupf*. They're both ever so nice."

She cut the richly decorated cakes, and, after handing them to Victoria, greedily helped herself.

"My beloved should not eat zese rich Austrian confectioneries," Mr. Costobadian anxiously suggested.

"You told me to buy them."

"Zey were to regale Mr. Dallas after ze fatigues of ze concert. He likes ze Continental *pâtisserie*."

"I think you spoil Colin," said Victoria.

"It is good for his art to give him what he likes. His music goes to ze devil when he is crossed."

Mrs. Costobadian glanced at the clock. "It's time we started."

"To listen to ze Bach, ze Beethoven and ze Brahms," said Mr. Costobadian in hushed ecstasy.

VI

EARLY in life Victoria had formed a mental picture of concert halls based upon descriptions of the Queen's Hall in London, which had figured prominently in the reminiscences of both her mother and Aunt Sophy. By a strange coincidence the Tresidders and the Lloyds (then unknown to each other) had patronized the Langham Hotel on their visits to the metropolis, and both ladies remembered how nice it had been after dinner to walk across the road to those delightful promenade concerts. Thus Victoria evolved a composite picture of the Queen's Hall and the Langham Hotel which uprose a pattern of all concert halls. She looked forward to a well-lighted, gilded room full of palms and red plush settees built back-to-back or in circles divided like hot-cross buns, placed without order on a crimson carpet. She expected to see ladies conversing sideways over bare shoulders with gentlemen, and couples strolling or looking down at the orchestra playing in a palm-fringed pit in the middle of the floor. Clearly a concert was an ornamental tail-piece to a day of pleasure.

The Manchester Free Trade Hall came as a rude shock. The green-distempered vast hall embraced within its walls an icy, rarefied atmosphere. It was inconceivable that the air had ever been added to or changed. Purified by countless oratorios and symphonies, enriched by the timbre of forgotten voices, it vibrated eerily to secret stores of music. Doors carelessly closed, chairs scraped on the floor, were recorded by it in anguished echoes.

Their reserved seats were near the front and on the central gangway with an uninterrupted view of the platform and its furniture of music-stands, bent-wood chairs and the wide baize-covered steps mounting to the organ. A gallery, with a balustrade advertising Cross and Blackwell specialities, Lockhart's dining-rooms, and Forsyth's pianos, ran round three sides of the hall and provided comfortless forms. In the well of the building subscribers were allotted small wooden chairs.

The tedium of waiting was mitigated for Victoria and the Costobadians by watching late arrivals from the suburbs of Didsbury and Chorlton disengage themselves from mackintoshes and lamb's-wool "fascinators" and reveal semi-evening clothes and frocks of delaine and nun's veiling. For the most part the audience was middle-aged, but on the side of the gallery facing the first violins girls and young women congregated.

Mrs. Costobadian drew Victoria's attention to them. "Look at those silly loonies waiting to see your husband!"

"Why do they?" asked Victoria in bewilderment.

"The girls are ever so gone on him. There'll be a mob outside the artists' entrance to see him leave. Women make themselves so cheap!"

Victoria pondered upon this revelation as she watched the orchestra emerge from depths under the platform and take their places. Colin was the last to appear. Up in the gallery the young ladies were disturbed, as if a wind had passed over a field of corn.

Colin's arrogant disdain was self-conscious. He glanced round the hall with wide unseeing gaze. When his eyes lighted on Victoria, he recognized her with a start and slowly smiled.

Suspecting a theatrical gesture in an intimate look

which included spectators, her response was ungracious. Indifferently he turned away. Victoria felt keen regret. She had been foolish to imagine that vulgar admiration could flatter such inflexible egoism. Colin didn't care what any one thought of him.

Against the background of red baize his profile was austere and remote—a romantic stranger with whom hours of intimacy brought no lasting union. It was impossible to think of him as a husband sharing humdrum episodes of married life. Disappointments of the honeymoon crowded to her memory, until her spirits sank beneath the load. Sorrowfully she realized that love did not matter to him. As a wife she fulfilled a need, but a lesser need than either art or ambition.

"Do you like Beethoven?" Mrs. Costobadian broke Victoria's reverie. She responded cautiously: "Do you?"

"I think he's ever so nice."

A sharp rap of the conductor's baton silenced Mrs. Costobadian: it called imprisoned echoes to attention. Unwillingly Victoria was cast upon a surging flood of sound.

§

Colin lay late in bed on the following morning. On her return from the communal breakfast Victoria found him eating rolls and drinking coffee. On his knees a tray rested. Mrs. Pratt, who had brought it, sat on the foot of the bed reading a notice of the concert in *The Manchester Guardian.*

Mrs. Pratt's face still bore traces of a bedtime application of cold cream; a bun of ill-brushed black hair hung like a wasp's nest upon her neck. She wore a gown of

soiled brown velvet trimmed with swansdown, slack stockings of grey worsted, and old felt slippers.

Scornfully she tossed the paper upon the bed. "Nobody can please the critics. The rendering of Beethoven's 'Pastoral' is approved, but the reading of Brahms is condemned as untraditional."

"Advancement is barred by the tombstones of the dead," Colin retorted.

"And yet how often have I tilted against custom! Only four years ago at Bradford I presented my own version of Juliet. Do you suppose the critics were appreciative? Not at all! They said I was old enough to know better."

"So you were—no woman over sixteen should attempt the part."

"Then how would you get your passion?"

"Not from a satiated matron," Colin replied.

"Oh, get along! I don't believe you've got as much ardour as a statue. What do you say, Mrs. Dallas?"

"I'm no judge."

Colin looked slyly at Victoria. "My wife is ingenuous."

"Then which is the ideal?" Mrs. Pratt persisted.

"There is no ideal. But some women are more intuitive than others."

Mrs. Pratt complacently stroked the swansdown on her dress. "I never lacked womanly perception."

"Then why, as a lady of sensibility, are you unaware that I wish to get up?"

"My dear lad, it would take more than a comely man in his nightshirt to shock me!"

"I guessed as much. But having acquired the conventions of a gentleman, I am shocked for you."

"You are a curé!" Mrs. Pratt got off the bed, and

with a dexterous kick spread her train behind her. With the tray balanced on her hip she walked majestically towards the door, where she turned and said: "When I was a girl I dreamed of being loved by a handsome man. Queer, wasn't it, that I should have accepted Pratt?"

"Amazing."

"One does some odd things when one is young."

The door closed.

"Funny old mountebank, isn't she?" Colin got up, slipped on a black Italian silk wrapper and tied its sash round his waist. Victoria's father and grandfather had worn brown woollen dressing-gowns of British origin secured with cord girdles. Despite a week's familiarity Colin's wraith-like silhouette was strange.

He collected his sponge and toothbrush from the wash-stand.

"You mustn't be a prude, Vic. I fear you lived over-long with your Aunt Sophy."

"Don't you agree that Mrs. Pratt is rather obtrusive?"

"But why be shocked? Modes and manners change so rapidly, it's hardly worth while to be dismayed. To-morrow her style of vulgarity may be quite *chic!*"

§

Mrs. Costobadian was annoyed because Colin had taken possession of her sitting-room and piano. His symphony, commenced in Leipzig, was nearing a stormy conclusion. Impervious to criticism, he paused in composition only for meals and rehearsals.

"My husband and I might as well have no suite for all the good it is to me," Mrs. Costobadian complained.

"You've got a bedroom fit for an *amourette*—what

more do you want?" Colin fixed a fresh cigarette into a jade holder.

She pouted her lips. "I want more than a bedroom."

"It's the setting that suits you best. Some women show to advantage in the hunting field, others on a golf course. If they have acumen they stick to their background—you'd be wise to do likewise." He crashed a chord upon the piano.

"I think you're ever so rude."

"I can't help that. Besides, it's your own fault for buying a piano—you should have got a gramophone."

"Paul doesn't like them."

"He is a tolerable pianist. Taken by and large, a gramophone gives a better rendering of 'The Gaby Glide' than an inexpert forefinger."

"Every one has to learn," Mrs. Costobadian said sullenly.

"Ye gods!"

"Then I suppose the best thing your wife and I can do is to go in to town."

He agreed enthusiastically: "A splendid idea!"

§

The shops were ready for Christmas. Expensive leather goods, silver frames, inkpots and powder bowls shone in polished splendour through the windows of King Street and St. Ann's Passage. Diamonds glittered upon bosoms of velvet, dance frocks hung limply from wooden stands, bookshops showed *de-luxe* editions and specially prepared juvenile literature.

Mrs. Costobadian hesitated before the windows of Leroy and Brunnetti. "I don't know whether to buy my husband a manicure set or a flagon of scent."

"Wouldn't he prefer either a book or music?"

"I don't believe in encouraging gentlemen to be unsociable. Besides, it's ever so nice to have a romantic touch in a present. Did I tell you that a manicure first introduced Paul and me?"

"When Miss Lemond caught influenza and you took her place in the men's hairdressing saloon at Leroy and Brunnetti's?"

"That's right, dear," Mrs. Costobadian returned in a disappointed tone.

"Then you'd better decide upon the manicure set."

"I'll think it over—there's another week to Christmas."

They walked towards the square across the reclaimed burial ground of St. Ann's Church. On a stall within a niche of the church wall fragile flowers made a subdued splash of colour.

A fine drizzle began to fall.

"It's starting to spot," said Mrs. Costobadian.

Victoria turned up her coat collar.

"We'd better get to Winter's and wait till Paul comes —it's silly in my delicate health to get wet."

They hurried through the throng parading the square. Fat Jewesses from Cheetham Hill brazenly surveyed fashionable Greeks from Higher Broughton; bearded Turks in plum-coloured coats and voluminous trousers walked flat-footedly in elastic-sided boots; anæmic English girls cast provocative glances at well-dressed youths.

"You do see lovely clothes on market days," said Mrs. Costobadian enviously. "But there's no pleasure in wearing anything decent without a figure to show it off."

"Some of the Jewesses are like barrels."

"They take it out mostly in sables and diamonds."

The restaurant welcomed them with odours of iced

cakes, buttered crumpets and the ghost of a lunch-time grill. Traversing the black-and-white tiling of the outer shop they entered a region of round tables and semi-circular pens of mahogany. Within a roped enclosure, like a prize ring, bandsmen with the heads of golliwogs and uniforms of Hungarian design were playing "Gipsy Love" with native vivacity. They ogled Victoria and Mrs. Costobadian as they passed.

"I don't like those high-backed circular seats without a gentleman—they make you feel like a wallflower at a dance. But they're ever so nice for spooning—when Paul and I were engaged we used to come every day for tea."

They sat down at a square table to the left of the orchestra. Mrs. Costobadian furtively applied powder to her nose.

"I think we'll wait till Paul comes off 'Change—it's after four."

Victoria sat looking down the long room towards the shop. A blue film of cigarette smoke hung on the air. As she gazed, the room suddenly changed its perspective. It receded and contracted, like a landscape seen through the wrong end of a telescope, and simultaneously her identity with her surroundings was severed—she became detached, a spectator watching a diminutive drama. She remembered an ant-heap disturbed in the garden at Tarbubbles, the tiny insects carrying disproportionately large eggs to safety. Connexion between the teashop and the memory conjured eluded her; on the surface the couples flirting and eating in the alcoves had no relationship with an unselfish community intent on safeguarding posterity. Only her feelings as a spectator remained intrinsically the same.

Within the roped enclosure the four musicians were playing a Hungarian Rhapsody with abandonment involving their whole bodies. Their luxuriant black hair lifted in response to the emotional demand, their fat posteriors, tightly encased in braided cloth, quivered in sympathy with shiny Hessian boots beating time. The 'cellist cast an amorous glance at Victoria.

New arrivals carrying dripping umbrellas came crowding through the swing-doors. Resolutely they searched for tables, wandering back and forth, leaving wet trails on the carpets.

"If Paul doesn't come soon, we shan't be able to keep a place for him."

Still gazing at a diminished perspective, Victoria answered perfunctorily: "He's just pranced through the door and collided with a Jewess."

Mrs. Costobadian bridled resentfully: "What a funny thing to say!"

"It happened."

They watched the dapper little Armenian politely dodging the surplus people who waited for seats. He greeted his wife and Victoria with enthusiasm.

"It is indeed a pleasure to be welcomed by beautiful ladies!" He turned to his wife. "All ze same it was unwise of my beloved to expose herself to zis unsympazetic climate."

"I'd not have traipsed in to town unless I'd been driven from the suite."

"Was ze fire smoking?" he inquired anxiously.

She answered sullenly: "Mr. Dallas was thumping on the grand piano."

Instead of feeling embarrassed and apologetic, Victoria was faintly amused. She felt completely detached, as

if Colin and his behaviour were no concern of hers. At the same time a subsidiary part of her mind stirred reproachfully. She leaned back in her chair, determined to retain her irrelated mood as long as she could.

Mrs. Costobadian elaborated angrily: "It's not even as if he was polite about it. He just comes and takes possession of the piano as if it belonged to him—without a with your leave or by your leave."

Mr. Costobadian looked distressed. "He has genius, and a genius is seldom polite. Zey make use of us for zeir big ends—it is natural zey should employ ze tools God puts in zeir way."

"You should take my part, especially as I have more at stake than music. Enough symphonies are written as it is, without upsetting ourselves to get another."

"Zat is not so, my beloved—and zere are not many who can compose. Not one in zis café, nor in zis city, will be immortalized by music. I consider it a privilege to assist in ze glorious achievement."

Mrs. Costobadian pouted. "Well, I think it cleverer to have a baby."

"But nearly everybody can have zem—ze more unfitted zey are ze more zey have. With genius it is different—it is rare. As a boy I hoped to be a Michael Angelo, a Chopin, a Napoleon. I became a cotton-broker. To be a benefactor to art will be something, and ze baby by listening to ze beautiful melodies may imbibe genius."

"So far as I can see, genius is as much good as a headache. I hope baby will be ordinary and go to business."

Mr. Costobadian looked at her sadly. "Ze wish will be granted—zere are so many ordinary zings in ze world."

VII

MRS. COSTOBADIAN'S baby was born early in the New Year. Its head was covered with wet-looking feathers of black hair, its face was wrinkled and worried, and it kept up a whimper of disgust at the situation in which it found itself. Mrs. Costobadian lay complacently in her silk-curtained bed surrounded with flowers and scented luxuries from Leroy and Brunnetti's. A nurse in crackling uniform kept Mrs. Fussell at bay and made sorties upon Mrs. Pratt in the kitchen.

To Colin Dallas, completing the last movement of his symphony, the event was most disturbing, as it deprived him of the piano.

"If she'd postponed the business for a fortnight, I'd not complain—it couldn't have happened at a worse time for me."

"But you knew the baby was expected in January," Victoria reminded him.

"Did I? I suppose I forgot; anyway, it's deuced inconvenient."

After a week's idlness he borrowed the music-room of a rich German Jew living at Timperley, from whence he returned late in the evenings. Victoria was thrown more than ever upon her own resources.

"It's lonely for me," she complained.

"Were I a business man, you'd say good-bye to me at eight in the morning and not see me again till night.

Because I'm not tied to regular hours, you're aggrieved when I leave you."

"I'm bored through having nothing to do—I hate this boarding-house life."

"It would be folly to get a place of our own until we know where we will settle. Why can't you interest yourself in the things women enjoy?"

"What are they?" she asked curiously.

"How should I know? I suppose gossiping, visiting restaurants and theatres. Don't I give you enough money?"

"Plenty. Only the distractions fail."

"Well, I don't know; you must work it out your own way."

A short-lived diversion was occasioned by Franko Fussell, who developed an ulcerated throat and was hustled off to the Royal Infirmary, where his tonsils were whipped out. After months spent in awaiting a miracle, Mrs. Fussell resented the prosaic nature of the substitute.

"We might just as well have had an operation at the beginning instead of wasting our furlough and money on a charlatan."

"I advised you to think twice," her husband answered ponderously.

"Thinking's no good—action is needed. Anyway, I shan't stay after what's happened. Fancy the Professor having the face to tell us Franko's tonsils were shivelling when I saw them intact on a platter at the hospital."

Her determination to vacate the boarding-house was equalled by Mrs. Pratt's eagerness to see her go. To hasten the event Victoria assisted with the packing. She was surprised at the number of useless possessions contained in the battered luggage and how little there was of real utility.

"I make the most dismal places homely with familiar knick-knacks," Mrs. Fussell said complacently. "I pack such treasures last and bring them out first, if you take my meaning. I'll lay them on the bed, then you can arrange them on top of the clothes."

She brought a large model of a Chinese Mission and balanced it on the pillow, where it left a square imprint in Kowloon dust. Its designer had an eye to propaganda rather than beauty. On an eminence of gritty substance stood a low white gospel hall surrounded by a compound, wherein clay figures busied themselves in earnest activities. A lay-reader conducted a class under a bamboo tree; a doctor amputated a patient's leg by the back door; white-smocked converts with cropped heads washed clothes, ground corn and chopped wood. Pig-tailed unregenerates, lounging outside in godless idleness, speculated upon the rewards of Christianity.

Mrs. Fussell put a number of photographs, a terra-cotta plaque and a stuffed crab on the eiderdown, and pulled a picture from the top of the wardrobe.

"This was a wedding present from my dear girls at Pakhoi School. Wasn't it gratifying they chose such a typically English picture?"

She turned the frame to the light. "'Chasing Shadows,' from the painting by Gwyneth Lloyd."

The flat Maltese roof lay bathed in sunlight, the mongrel dog from Vicolo Marina sprawled in borrowed majesty upon a stone seat, a little girl with a fuzz of hair held out her hands to a shadow.

Victoria looked at her juvenile self with compassion and curiosity. The agonies caused by the Empire frock revived with the freshness of a memory laid by and

forgotten. Thoughts and impressions belonging to the house in Sliema returned like a faint perfume.

"Isn't it pretty? Franko calls the picture his sweetheart, and at one time wouldn't go to bed until he'd kissed the little girl good night. I'll pack it face down on the top of Mr. Fussell's underwear—it would never do if it got broken."

"It would be a pity."

§

In February Colin finished his symphony, *Procne and Philomela*, and with the aid of amateurs gave a performance in a local hall. It was well received by a scanty audience of musical enthusiasts, and was accorded the following notice in *The Manchester Guardian*: "Mr. Dallas, not content with his recent violin recital, has written a symphony which he conducted before a select audience of devotees at the Birch Villa Assembly Rooms. From the enthusiastic applause we inferred that the bright spirits whose business it is to be a decade ahead of their time recognized in *Procne and Philomela* a merit we cannot detect. To our minds Mr. Dallas has unwittingly demonstrated that original musical expression is one thing and the writing of noteworthy music another."

Colin was undismayed by this scathing comment, and started to look about for a means of presenting *Procne and Philomela* to the public in a sufficiently grandiose manner.

"Couldn't you get the Hallé Society to play it next season?" Victoria suggested.

His look of scorn enlightened her. "What good would that do? I might as well present it in a barn with the door shut."

"I thought it impossible to overestimate the musical importance of Manchester."

"It is an unrivalled intermediary between Continentally trained artists and the British public, but as a pioneer in musical discovery it is nowhere. The City Fathers are afraid of financial disaster."

"Is it a question of advertising?"

"Chiefly. A fanfare is required to quicken Philistine ears, and trumpeters are expensive."

Although the scanty notice accorded Colin's symphony was disdainful, the fact of his having composed at all increased the interest of his admirers. His progress through the fashionable parts of the town was rendered embarrassing by the excitement it created, and when he and Victoria went to the theatre, following Mrs. Costobadian's gala dinner at the Midland Hotel, the curiosity of the audience was unrestrained. Autograph hunters sent him picture post cards to be signed; a firm of piano-makers offered substantial fees if he would give violin lessons at their premises to clients who had approached them.

"It sounds profitable," said Colin as he read the proposal.

"In referring to clients, do they mean the parents of talented children?"

"More likely overdressed Jewesses with spreading beams." A contemptuous expression crossed his face.

§

Colin's arrogance increased with his popularity. His mannerisms became more pronounced and his disdain for the courtesies of life greater. He discovered a defect in the sight of his right eye, which he corrected with the aid of a monocle worn on a wide ribbon. The black clothes

he affected became more pronouncedly foreign in cut. The glamour his exotic personality exercised over Victoria strengthened and left her entranced and exhausted. Subconsciously resenting his domination, she looked back regretfully at her old independence.

Colin found the giving of lessons considerably more lucrative than orchestral work. The supply seemed inexhaustible of richly dressed women who felt impelled to express themselves in music. Names were continually added to a long waiting list. He became the recipient of costly gifts of jewellery, of which he wore some and sold others to a dealer in Covent Garden. Such tributes he regarded in a strictly commercial light. Invitations to dinners, luncheons and week-end parties were showered upon him and were refused with a supercilious disdain that goaded his enamoured pupils to further efforts at capture. As his personality seemed likely to yield a more profitable return than the exercise of his talent, he decided to remain in Manchester for the summer instead of seeking an engagement at a foreign *Kursaal*. He was no nearer a spectacular presentation of his symphony.

It was just before Easter, when he was rehearsing the oratorio *Elijah* which was to wind up the season's activities on a suitably religious note, that the great idea presented itself.

He returned home one afternoon carrying an illustrated society paper. With an air of indifference he opened it at the first page and handed it without comment to Victoria.

She recognized Miriam in the beautifully dressed woman posed in languid contemplation of a bowl of goldfish, whilst two Jewish children leant against her skirts. The letterpress said: "Our readers will be inter-

ested in the latest studio portrait of Mrs. Otto Guttenburg and her children, Mendal and Beenah. Mr. Guttenburg's interest in music, which takes a practical form, will give Londoners an opportunity during the coming season of hearing the works of promising young composers. Rumour has it that the great financier has acquired Hammerstein's ill-starred Opera House. Mrs. Guttenburg entertains extensively at her charming house in Green Street, Park Lane."

"How extraordinary!" said Victoria.

Colin answered irritably: "What is?"

"That Miriam should be so grand."

"She is clever—the only foolish thing she did was to marry your grandfather."

"That was his mistake," she snapped.

"I disagree. He had everything to gain from the marriage, she had nothing."

"He was honourable and kind."

"Neither qualities are of much consolation to a rich and beautiful woman tied in her prime to an old man."

"Has she bettered her position with Mr. Guttenburg? —wealth will never make him anything but a bounder."

"Your standards are so narrow. You disqualify every man who doesn't conform to a stereotyped pattern manufactured in Gunrooms and Wardrooms."

Victoria considered the accusation before she replied: "Seamen are usually genuine and guiltless of affectations."

"Nonsense! Naval tradition is in itself a conceit. Nobody knows that better than I, and nobody offered the cult more violent opposition. You absorbed so much of the Service outlook, it's warped your ideas. Every one must be conscious of your intolerance."

Although she considered his reproaches unjust, Victoria

took the rebuke much to heart and brooded upon it until she made herself ill.

A few weeks later he said casually: "Guttenburg's going to give *Procne and Philomela* a show in town at the beginning of September."

"How did you get in touch with him?" Victoria asked suspiciously.

Colin, winding a recently acquired platinum watch on a flexible bracelet, was outlined against the window. His sleekly brushed hair with the light shining down upon it looked like a black satin cap. Her eyes travelled down his slim graceful figure, wide-shouldered, narrow-flanked, tapering to foreign pointed shoes.

Her heart gave an excited flutter as if she were seeing him for the first time. In the few moments' pause her thoughts had travelled so far and her feelings had undergone such a change that she had difficulty in recapturing the theme of their discussion.

Colin's voice sounded bored: "Oh, I wrote to him and sent him the score. He's enthusiastic. In addition he's volunteered to let me be soloist at one of the concerts he's financing in aid of charity. With luck we ought to be in a position to abandon this pretentious town to its fate in the autumn."

"But why should he wish to help you?—he must know so many ambitious young men."

"Naturally I utilized his connexion with ourselves for all it was worth."

"But there is none."

He answered pettishly: "How absurd you are, Victoria! The relationship is quite obvious. Your grandfather was my guardian; Guttenburg marries his widow. The link is very close."

"Under the circumstances not one to be proud of."

"I don't see it—he's done well for Miriam. He's rolling in money, and is a power in the artistic world. Strangely enough, he shares your admiration for Admirals, and appears proud of his connexion with one."

"How magnanimous of him!" Victoria made her voice sound cold, sarcastic, and scorned herself for so doing.

"What a thoroughly feminine thing to say!" Colin drawled, "but as a matter of fact it is rather a generous attitude, because they must have had a deuced uncomfortable time until the old man died. The world is so uncharitable to unmarried people who have a child for whom they cannot easily account."

"That was their look out."

"Quite—but he needn't have been a dog in the manger. A divorce would have meant nothing to him, but it would have made all the difference to them."

"It doesn't alter their behaviour."

"Which is only a sin against convention when all is said and done. You, who claim to like reality, should be the first to find excuses for their passion."

"I loved Granddaddy."

"A reason demonstrating the ambiguity of feminine morals. Theoretically exemplary, your code goes to pieces when it comes to conflicting emotions."

Recollecting her grandfather's well-meaning ineptitudes which had flung the family into disaster, she felt Colin's assertion was just.

"He meant so well," she heard herself saying in excuse.

VIII

SPRING had come to Manchester. April sunlight filled the streets with a yellow glow. Flowers heaped the stall in St. Ann's Passage, horses were decorated with ribbons, the Albert Square pigeons strutted with the assertive antics of the mating season. In a boisterous wind bits of straw and paper indigenous to the pavements frisked and twirled above the roofs; a strip of pink calico impaled itself on a pinnacle of the Prince Consort's memorial, where it fluttered impudently.

Victoria walked with Mrs. Costobadian and the perambulator in Whitworth Park. Gardeners were planting red geraniums; little plane trees, bandaged and propped by crutches, had broken into leaf; a fountain in the middle of a flower-bed threw up a thin needle of water.

"This park's too bare to be what you'd call pretty, isn't it?" Mrs. Costobadian questioned.

"It's hideous," said Victoria.

"Not like illustrations of London parks. Gracious! Baby's been ever so sick again. I don't know what I'm to do with him; he doesn't seem able to keep anything down."

She leant over the perambulator to mop the baby's chin with a scented lace handkerchief. Secretly fearful of coping with a nurse, Mrs. Costobadian managed the baby herself, assisted by the hints on infant welfare in weekly journals. She took her duties very seriously, but despite her painstaking experiments with a variety of patent foods the baby did not thrive.

Wearing a French hat, fur coat, satin dress and long emerald earrings, Mrs. Costobadian looked too grand for the business of motherhood, and quite out of place in Whitworth Park, a refuge for the ragged and destitute.

"There now!" She gave the perambulator an encouraging joggle. "I should think your husband's well on his journey to London now, shouldn't you?"

"Nearing Bedford, I expect."

"It's a pity you didn't go with him. Especially as your swell relations made a point of it. It doesn't do to let husbands visit on their own—it gives them ideas of freedom which it's best for them not to get."

"I was sorry, but I could hardly change my mind."

"That's where it is!" said Mrs. Costobadian profoundly.

In silence they traversed a long straight path, and turned into another equally long and straight.

Mrs. Costobadian spoke again in shrill exasperation: "Could you believe it! Baby's been sick again!"

§

Victoria regarded Colin's acceptance of the Guttenburg's help as an act of treachery to the Admiral's memory. Her failure to convert him to her way of thinking had involved them in quarrels only interrupted by enforced truces at bedtime. Colin suffered less from the conflicts than Victoria, and returned from London on such good terms with the universe that he could afford to overlook the disagreements which had embittered his going. He brought Victoria an opal necklace, a carved ornament of jade and a photograph of Miriam's children, which had unfortunately got bent.

"The Guttenburgs are quite the most charming and original people I've come across in this country, and

they've gathered together a crowd of musicians, artists and writers as cosmopolitan as any you'd meet in Paris or Vienna."

"So you've enjoyed yourself?"

"Rather! After months of provincial society it's intoxicating. I wonder I've endured Manchester so long. It will be a lesson to me in the future to avoid a backwater. What have you been doing?"

"Reading, and watching Mrs. Costobadian experimenting with the baby."

"It's a revolting infant and ought to be scuppered!" He looked about vaguely for the key of his box. Victoria gave it to him.

"I ordered a new suit at Scholte's—brown with a narrow line. I remembered your dislike for black." He smiled at her ingratiatingly.

"Why brown?"

"Everybody's wearing it. And I bought something else to please you." He unrolled a silk scarf embroidered with a Naval crown.

"Father had one like it," said Victoria.

"Crowns look rather well, and it won't be recognized outside the Service. The other night a man from the Italian Embassy wore a scarf embroidered with his coronet."

He unpacked the remainder of his clothes and cast them on the bed.

"There," he said triumphantly, "you can put them away. I never know where things go."

To all appearances the rift was made up. Colin either forgot or elected to ignore the quarrels remembered by Victoria with shuddering dismay.

He did not go to London again until the middle of

June, when he paid a flying visit to Green Street to play at an afternoon reception devised for the entertainment of an obscure Indian prince. He played Brahms' *Wiegenlied*, Louis Couperin's *La Précieuse* and Wieniawski's *Caprice in A minor*, to a talkative and inattentive audience. Such was his pleasure in the Guttenburgs that he appeared hardly to notice treatment to which he would have taken exception in other company. He got back to Manchester just before midnight, well pleased with the day's experience.

"We lunched at the 'Ritz' before going to Green Street. Lauterbach was there who taught me in Dresden. Before I left he congratulated me upon the improvement in my technique, and hinted that he would use his influence in Berlin on my behalf."

"But if the Guttenburgs introduce you as they promised you'll get engagements in London."

"Very likely. But all things being equal, I'd rather live on the Continent."

"I don't want to live abroad."

"You'd have to make the best of it."

No further friction arose until Mrs. Guttenburg sent Victoria another affectionate invitation to Green Street. Colin, it appeared, was to be a soloist at a concert Mr. Guttenburg was financing in Shoreditch with the object of fostering a love of music amongst the masses. A few nights later he was to play at a reception at the Italian Embassy. Mrs. Guttenburg wanted them to stay with her between the engagements.

Victoria's quixotic loyalty to an idea again made her refuse the invitation and incur Colin's displeasure. Her fantastic scruples had gained strength; she tried to explain her feelings more clearly. Put into words they

sounded foolish. She read his look of exasperation.

"I didn't suppose you would understand. Hardly any one remained true to the old man. If I accept Mr. Guttenburg's hospitality, it will be like adding an epilogue to a tragedy."

"In your concern for the welfare of your grandfather's memory, you overlook the harm you are doing to my future."

"I don't think anything I do or fail to do will affect your career. I'm a very humble unit in your admiring retinue, and I don't really count."

"You won't, if you decline to help me."

§

Victoria was not denied sympathy in her solitude. Mrs. Pratt, deprived of Mr. Pratt's company after the untoward incident with the Fussells, constituted herself a sister in adversity.

"Male vanity has caused our plight. I should be sorry to count the occasions Mr. Pratt has restored his self-esteem with the purchase of a railway ticket. This time he's gone to Ostend. I've never heard of any useful products coming from there save rabbits, and even they have a peculiar flavour which suggests an unnatural life."

"They're reared in cages for the market."

"Ah, that accounts for it."

The mention of cages suggested *Belle Vue* to Mrs. Pratt's mind. As Victoria was unfamiliar with the exhibition, an afternoon's outing was arranged. When the day came Victoria felt ill and strangely giddy, but such was Mrs. Pratt's eagerness for the jaunt that she hadn't the heart to disappoint her by remaining at home.

They started after lunch on the last Monday in June.

The sultry air was heavy with thunder; pewter-black clouds hung over Manchester and threw into relief the forest of factory chimneys stretching from Old Trafford to Salford. A lurid glow from the east gave the jaundiced colouring of things seen through yellow glass.

Mrs. Costobadian came to the front door to see them off. She looked at the sky. "It's ever so black over town. I wouldn't go on an afternoon like this."

"I don't believe in being scared by a thunderstorm," said Mrs. Pratt valiantly, "and at *Belle Vue* there's plenty of cover. We can shelter in the lion house."

"Well, I wouldn't," Mrs. Costobadian advised.

Before they got into the tram Mrs. Pratt bought a newspaper.

"We'll need it to sit on; the benches in the gardens are smothered in soot. Last time I ruined a gown." She opened the paper and glanced at the headlines. "There's been a do in Servia. Another of those foreign Archdukes has been assassinated."

"I saw it in *The Morning Post*."

"And his wife. I wouldn't care to be married to a Continental nobleman—too many sacrifices are expected."

The tram traversed a mean neighbourhood of low brick terraces, tiny shops, factories, saw-mills, and metal refineries. Hoardings were reared upon embankments and on the roofs of houses; vistas of black yards, privies, clothes-lines and zinc pails stretched into the illimitable distance.

Suddenly Victoria had the curious sensation of seeing the houses and streets swing towards her, recede, and rear up in a lopsided dance: a phenomenon quickly blotted out by a black mist. So this was fainting. She felt fearfully interested in a novel condition which brought

with it a strange magnification of sound. She closed her eyes and surrendered herself to a gentle rocking motion that was not wholly unpleasant. Gradually the world steadied itself, the grinding of the tram once more became a subsidiary sound. She opened her eyes upon rows of dismal dwellings built in stiff, straight lines.

Mrs. Pratt was still reading the paper; her voice came in jerky syncopation: "I wonder why the Government's mobilizing all the fleet instead of having the usual summer manœuvres? There's something at the bottom of it, I'll be bound." Glancing at Victoria for corroboration, her deathly pallor arrested Mrs. Pratt's attention. "You are green. Your face looks like a 'make up' for a corpse."

"Perhaps it's the shadow of the impending storm."

"Happen it's not! But, anyway, we shall be under cover before that breaks. If we do the gardens first, the rain won't trouble us. The entrance to *Belle Vue* is by the lamp-post." In her eagerness she nudged Victoria.

"I see a public-house."

"It's a part of the property—the Midland Hotel doesn't keep a better cellar. A drop of porter wouldn't do *you* any harm."

"Oh no, thank you."

Mrs. Pratt sounded disappointed: "Of course we'll have tea if you prefer, but it's not nearly so good for depressed spirits."

They passed through a turnstile into a narrow alley enclosed by privet hedges. Stale smells of straw, ammonia, raw meat, animals' hides, and rotting wood, embraced them in a pungent reek. The roaring of lions, the shrill squeals of parrots predominated above a disturbing tumult of caged beasts. They left the shelter of the alley

and emerged on to an undulating sheet of asphalt dotted with brick houses, bushes of privet and notice-boards. A gust of wind blew a cloud of dust into their eyes.

Mrs. Pratt led the way to a circle of iron railings surrounding a stone-paved pit where a couple of polar bears ambled in opposing circles.

"Cluck-cluck!" Mrs. Pratt encouragingly clicked her tongue.

The bears paused and rocked themselves drearily.

"They're not very intelligent beasts."

Victoria had never seen so much asphalt before. It stretched in grey acres to the base of a scenic mountain range which gave the gardens privacy and an air of romance which they might otherwise have lacked.

Mrs. Pratt held up a warning finger. "Hark! Lions! Doesn't the sound make you feel like a pagan wandering through the wilderness?"

Victoria looked at the asphalt and the mountains of laths and canvas.

She agreed doubtfully.

"To get a primitive throwback one must half close the eyes."

Mrs. Pratt stood still and puckered her eyelids. She nodded several times to show that the experiment had proved successful.

They approached a shambling wooden structure with a shabby stucco façade overlooking an artificial lake that undulated beneath a scum of tram tickets, straw and orange peel. The grinding of a mechanical piano and the slur of heavy boots on a wooden floor came through an open door.

"I think I shall have to rest," said Victoria faintly.

"You do look ill! Come into the ball-room and sit down."

Victoria staggered to a chair near the door. She was dimly aware of a long room decorated with speckled mirrors and disintegrating plaster; of tightly embraced couples revolving in trance-like rhythm to a monotonous tune.

"I'll fetch you a drop of something to do you good," said Mrs. Pratt.

When she reappeared carrying a thick tumbler containing a colourless liquid Victoria was beginning to recover.

"There, dearie, if you drink that down you'll feel your own woman again. There's nothing like a double gin for restoring the pulse. When Mrs. Costobadian was expecting, I brought her round many a time with a drop of the right stuff. Being anxious to appear genteel, she always asked for champagne or brandy. I used to say 'yes, dearie,' but I gave her gin. She never knew the difference, poor girl!"

Victoria drank off the evil-tasting dose, and felt better.

"I can see by your colour that you're all right again. I'll just take the glass back, then if you feel equal we'll start on the animals. In your condition there's nothing like diverting the mind."

She trailed through the open door of the ball-room and crossed the grey asphalt quadrangle. Big drops of rain began to fall.

IX

THROUGH Mr. Guttenburg's influence Colin was accorded a larger Press than is usually given to a violinist unknown to London. He was interviewed and photographed; a popular daily paper hailed him as a new star and wrote him up at considerable length for five successive mornings. Congratulations were showered upon Mr. Guttenburg for a discovery likely to do much for British music. Interest generally was directed to *Procne and Philomela* announced to be produced in September at the Central Hall, Westminster.

Colin's success aroused great excitement in Manchester. A reporter tried to interview Victoria, but was intercepted by Mr. Costobadian. Ladies who had previously shown no wish to learn the violin clamoured to be put on the waiting list; invitations to dinners, dances and week-end parties arrived by every post.

With mingled feelings Victoria read the eulogies in the Press. Whilst she was delighted at Colin's success, it put him farther from her than ever. Less and less would he need her as his fame increased. She foresaw a future in which as a shy negative woman she would trail in his wake from capital to capital to watch his triumphs from obscure corners of concert halls. Looking at his new photograph which filled the front page of *The Tatler*, she tried to develop a feeling of intimate equality. She failed signally, and got no nearer a possessive attitude

than comes to the admirer of a *jeune premier* who has seen her hero many times.

As the days passed, bringing no further warnings of a condition suspected by Mrs. Pratt, Victoria was able to forget the fears her crude insinuations created.

Although the subject had not been broached, Victoria knew Colin considered children an encumbrance and would decline to alter his mode of life on their account. She found herself envying the married who had houses, furniture, beds, and servants, and a future they could think of with confidence. Babies should be born into serene homes replete with nurseries and to parents who took responsibilities seriously.

Colin came back unexpectedly on a July afternoon. On returning from a walk in Platt Fields, Victoria found him talking with Mr. Costobadian.

He greeted her with friendly urbanity and echoed a remark she was tired of hearing: "You look awfully white and drawn—what have you been doing?"

"Nothing, just going about as usual."

"You'd better fix up a visit to Flasher's End. I was telling Costobadian that we shan't be here much longer. Mrs. Pratt wept on my neck when I broke the news. Really quite affecting."

Standing with his back to the dusty sunlight, Colin's dark, petulant face was in shadow. Immaculate clothes, fitting without a crease, accentuated the slimness of his waist; eau-de-Cologne and expensive cosmetics scented the air. Absently he rubbed his polished nails against the palm of his other hand.

Wearing dusty office clothes, Mr. Costobadian sat on a low stool hugging his knees and gazing at Colin in round-eyed admiration.

Victoria thought: He looks like a plump partridge trussed for cooking. Aloud she said: "Isn't it frightfully hot?"

"I hadn't noticed," Colin answered.

As Mrs. Costobadian entered she interjaculated: "*You* never feel the heat; 'Toria and I were baked pushing baby."

"I should think so!" Colin raised his eyebrows superciliously.

She bridled. "It's ever so necessary for children to get fresh air. When we get to Blackpool I'll wheel him all day on South Shore."

"Really? Are you going soon?"

"The second week in August."

"Then we all forsake dear Mrs. Pratt at about the same time."

Mr. Costobadian added an eager explanation: "Mr. Dallas has taken a house in St. John's Wood, so he can supervise ze rehearsals of his symphony."

" 'Toria ought to go to the seaside." Mrs. Costobadian looked aggressively at Colin.

"And why not?" Affably he retorted.

"She oughtn't to be alone."

"Nobody could be solitary by the sea in August."

"That kind of companionship doesn't help."

"Which will suit Victoria. She is very independent."

§

Colin commenced to wind up his affairs in Manchester. He made good-bye calls upon acquaintances who might be of service in the future and worked his way through the list of waiting pupils. Victoria saw little of him. Success had advanced his egoism and completed the

separation of his work from domestic ties. Passionate hours were speedily forgotten; morning found him making a celibate's plans.

"Have you fixed when you're going to Flasher's End?"

"Not yet." After a pause she reluctantly added: "Perhaps I'd better go on the fifth of August."

"Right! I must be in London at the end of this month. By returning immediately after Bank Holiday I could travel up with you and take the heavy luggage to St. John's Wood."

His reticence intimidated. Victoria feared to give shape to her apprehensions by putting them into words and avoided inquiries which might lead to a rebuff. Finally of his own accord he mentioned the new house.

"Miriam's arranging everything. She says she knows exactly the decorations to agree with the Tresidders' *schnecks*. I said for my part I don't care a damn what she chooses so long as there is a comfortable bed and some decent chairs."

"Why should Miriam have the ordering of your house?"

"It's only lent to me, intrinsically it's hers. On leaving your grandfather she bought the place for the birth of the child; now she keeps it for sentimental reasons."

"So it won't cost you anything?"

"I'll have to pay for messing and service."

"It isn't right to accept so much from people."

"On the contrary, it's gracious to take everything proffered by friends. Charming women appreciate opportunities for generosity. To refuse a benefit for the sake of maintaining absurd principles would be to acknowledge myself a supercilious prig."

"You're robbing yourself of independence."

"Not at all! I feel no indebtedness to Miriam. She's

lashings of money and will be amply rewarded by the *éloeg* accorded to the patroness of a rising violinist. How d'you imagine it's possible to live comfortably in town until I'm established? At first there'll be little profit. Half my engagements will be 'dummy-runs,' only yielding advertisement. Time enough for pride when I command my own price."

A predicted heat wave reached Manchester towards the end of July and raised the temperature of the narrow streets to scorching point. A shimmering haze hung above the paving-stones; every warehouse and shop was a reflector for the brazen sun.

Longing for the country, Victoria and Mrs. Costobadian, in turns carrying the baby, journeyed by tram and bus to Northenden. The goal was disappointing. From a suspension bridge the black evilly-smelling river Mersey, a depository for dead cats and dogs, tin cans and skeletons of umbrellas, could be seen wriggling through miles of dingy flat fields. Only when conducted over inclined planks before the Weir Hotel did the river break into a meagre demonstration of brown foam.

They spent the day sitting on a shelving bank opposite the hotel, alternately fanning themselves and the baby with a folded newspaper.

The afternoon was well advanced before Victoria disgraced herself by being violently sick. The publicity of the place distressed her more than the torments accompanying the seizure.

Mrs. Costobadian was both resourceful and kind. Leaving her son kicking on the grass, she walked across the bridge to the street of straggling shops, where she engaged a dilapidated motor. Lethargic with sickness,

Victoria was driven back to the boarding-house and put to bed.

Colin was out. A disorder of shirts and underwear, a crumpled white tie and a pair of black silk socks were evidence of a hasty evening toilet.

"Your 'Sprig o' joy' is dining at the 'Midland' with the Israel Rosenburgs," Mrs. Pratt announced as she bathed the invalid's head.

"I'm glad," moaned Victoria.

"When paying the price it's a relief to get the cause of the trouble out of the way." Mrs. Pratt suddenly broke into lugubrious song: "Lightheartedly we kiss and coo, with dirges dree our weird."

"When I was expecting, I never wished to be parted from Paul. He was ever such a comfort," said Mrs. Costobadian reminiscently.

"He's a good little man and has a kind heart," Mrs. Pratt acknowledged, "but a seasoning of vice would improve him. I do like a man to *be* a man."

§

Victoria had a wretched night. She awoke at eight o'clock after an hour of troubled sleep. The blinds were up and the room was flooded with yellow light. Colin, dressed in his black silk wrapper, was sitting on the floor surrounded by open trunks and heterogeneous possessions. Selecting a key from a bunch in his hand, he opened a tin case. A uniform cap with a white cover lay on the top; he picked it up and twirled it round on one finger. Casting it aside, he delved again, and brought out a sword and a monkey jacket with two tarnished stripes on each sleeve.

Victoria wearily sat up in bed.

"Hallo! Awake at last?"

"I've hardly slept."

Ignoring her plaint, he went on rummaging. She asked:

"What made you keep your uniform?"

"Much as an ex-prisoner might keep his handcuffs as mementoes."

He held the coat against the light.

"It's looking rather seedy; moths are browsing on the cloth."

"What a pity!" mourned Victoria.

"The little blighters can have it and welcome!"

He sat back on his haunches and surveyed the littered floor.

"Perhaps I'd better leave this and get my bath. I'm going to town by the 12.30. Guttenburg wired yesterday—there are details to be settled about the symphony."

Mrs. Pratt was greatly taken with the uniform coat when she brought Victoria's breakfast. When Colin returned from the bathroom, she made him put it on. It fitted across the shoulders, but hung loosely at the waist.

"What a gross youngster I must have been!"

"Perhaps you didn't take lemon for the figger in those days?"

"No, I didn't," he answered huffily.

"You look very nice. It's a pity the coat's creased and got moth. When you're away I'll go over it with a damp cloth and an iron."

"Thanks," said Colin.

§

Instead of keeping to his plans, Colin accepted an invitation to join Mr. Guttenburg's party in his steam yacht *Mazzoltov* for Cowes week. Victoria, convalescent

after several days' indisposition, was unwilling to go to Flasher's End without first seeing him. Miss Tresidder was annoyed.

Every one had been kind to Victoria. Mr. Costobadian, endeavouring to make up for Colin's absence, had made extravagant purchases of fruit and flowers; Mrs. Pratt, whose suspicions had been verified by a doctor, had been assiduous in her attentions; Mrs. Costobadian did what she could in the intervals she could spare from the baby. Nobody studied the newspapers.

The threat of war came upon them as an unexpected and ready-made catastrophe. Awakening to the trend of foreign affairs, Mr. Costobadian abandoned his office to its fate, and stood in the Royal Exchange glued to the tape machine which recorded in faulty type the swift change of events. The gist of such information he sent home in sixpenny telegrams.

By the first of August the Costobadians, Victoria and Mrs. Pratt had reached the tense pitch of apprehension common to the whole country. When in the late afternoon the tape slowly spelt out Germany's ultimatum to St. Petersburg, the reported detention of British ships in German ports, and Germany's refusal to guarantee Belgian neutrality, Mr. Costobadian felt that the news was too momentous to trust to telegraph wires. He sped home in a taxi, and, stuttering with excitement, broke in upon the alarmed women.

"I only hope Mr. Pratt has been warned of his danger," said Mrs. Costobadian.

"Zere will be many refugees from Belgium: civilians are ze first to suffer."

"The Professor," Mrs. Pratt replied, "will leave Ostend on the first boat if I know anything of him."

Victoria was trying to adapt herself to the readjustment of ideas which war necessitated. Problems which overwhelmed her a few days before no longer existed; others more menacing took their place. Would Colin report himself to the Admiralty? Or would self-interest blind him to his duty?

A night's rest accustomed the household to the country's peril. On Sunday Mr. Costobadian made two journeys to town to read the bulletins glued to the windows of the *Guardian* office. Nothing very momentous was reported.

The tense anxiety which had held them all day relaxed a little at supper. Speculation gave place to reminiscences. Mrs. Pratt remembered the German Emperor's almost filial regard for Queen Victoria, and took comfort from the fact that he had been a pall-bearer at her funeral. She was assured that rather than jeopardize the cordial feelings existing between himself and the English Royal Family he would take a firm hand with the *Reichstag*. She drew deductions from the South African War as to the probable plan of campaign should the worst come to the worst.

Ransacking a cupboard, she found a pair of faded cotton Union Jacks, which she stuck crosswise over the fireplace, and from her jewel-case resurrected a number of photographic buttons of once famous British Generals. One by one she jabbed the pins into the frame of the over-mantel.

"Redvers Buller, Kitchener, Roberts, Baden Powell, Evelyn Wood . . ."

They went to bed in moods of patriotic fervour.

X

THEY took it for granted that Colin would be returning to the Navy, and gave him the admiration and respect due to a warrior in time of war. By studying hastily prepared handbooks on the fighting strength of the British fleet, they became sufficiently informed to speculate upon the class of ship to which he would be appointed.

"In my opinion it will be eizer ze *Iron Duke* or *Marlborough,*" said Mr. Costobadian.

"The *Tiger.*" Mrs. Pratt spoke authoritatively.

Mrs. Costobadian looked at Victoria for enlightenment. "What do you say, 'Toria?"

"Perhaps one of the *Majestics.*"

Mr. Costobadian hastily referred to his list of battleships.

"But zey're such old boats."

By joining in their conjectures Victoria hoped to stifle doubt. Drawing upon her imagination, she pictured Colin in deeds of heroism; the King awarded him the Victoria Cross and a D.S.O. It became less difficult to picture a voluntary call at the Admiralty.

On the morning after the declaration of war Mr. Costobadian took to his own tailors Colin's monkey jacket to have half-stripes added to the sleeves. He left the house carrying the brown-paper parcel across his arms as if it were a precious burden. Victoria watched him walking towards the gates, a plump little figure dressed

in a tight morning coat and striped trousers and a tiny sailor hat that perched jauntily on his curls.

Victoria and Mrs. Costobadian took the baby for an airing in the Oxford Road. Purpose and enthusiasm dominated the crowds thronging the pavements; recruits whose uninteresting faces were transformed by patriotic ecstasy marched to improvised depôts; soldiers, guns, and horses were mustering in Platt Fields.

Such warlike preparations had a restorative effect upon Victoria's flagging faith. She chided herself for unjust thoughts. If clerks, hawkers, cotton-spinners and colliers rallied to the country's protection, surely Colin, bred to Naval traditions, would not hesitate. Her confidence and courage waxed high. She walked beside the perambulator with a swing, keeping time to the penny whistles played by the marching men.

Mrs. Costobadian surveyed the novel scene with astonishment and some alarm. "It might be the wakes!" she said nervously.

On their return to the boarding-house Victoria looked at the letter-rack. There was only a circular addressed to Mr. Costobadian. She stifled her disappointment and excused Colin's neglect on the grounds of the important matters claiming his attention. His last letter had been written prior to his departure for Cowes and before the European situation had become menacing.

Probably he was detained at the Admiralty and by his outfitters; also his agreement with Miriam for the house in St. John's Wood would have to be cancelled. With so many calls upon his time it was not surprising that he had not written. Already he might be on his way back to Manchester. How silly she had been not to think of that before! By the afternoon hope had become a

certainty. Colin would return by the 2.25 train from London and arrive in time for dinner. She decided to re-pack the boxes.

With some difficulty she pulled the heavy luggage into the middle of the room. She threw out the music, which filled a tin case, and carefully restored the remnants of uniform, a sextant and a telescope, from ignominious banishment in the hair trunk. The sword needed cleaning. She took it down to the kitchen.

Mrs. Pratt was dolefully peeling potatoes by the table. The air was tainted by a faint reek of gin.

"The Professor was very partial to chips fried in butter." Tears escaped from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Victoria patted her kindly on the shoulder. "I'm sure he'll come back."

"I hope so. It'll be very lonely contending with the war when you've all gone."

Whilst Victoria cleaned the sword blade with emery powder, they discussed the latest bulletins. As the descendant of a long line of Naval ancestors, she was regarded by Mrs. Pratt as an authority. Victoria found such deference pleasant, despite its foolishness; soon she caught herself boasting of Colin's probable prowess in battle. They agreed that everything pointed to his return in time for dinner.

Mrs. Pratt went out to buy some cream.

Victoria sat in the kitchen listening to the clock ticking. She felt very tired, and decided to go upstairs again to rest on the bed.

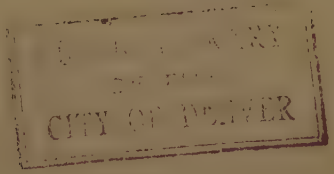
As she lay down she thought: This evening I must pack my box. It will be pleasant to be back at Flasher's End, to watch the grim-looking destroyers streaking out of Portland Harbour, to hear the dull boom of guns

through the mist, to see vapour rising like steam from Lodmoor on autumn evenings. And at the back of everything, sustaining her through pain and anxiety, was her pride in Colin. She thought again of the Victoria Cross and pictured herself waiting outside Buckingham Palace while Colin went in to receive it from the King. She fell asleep.

It was nearly seven when she awakened. The post had been and some one had propped a letter against the candlestick.

Hastily she tore the envelope open and read: "When fools go to war wise men profit by their folly. I'm taking over the tour of the much-advertised violinist, Emil Krieger, who has gone back to his fatherland. I'm sure you'll agree it is a great piece of luck. When you receive this I shall be in Glasgow, so you will realize I cannot possibly get to Manchester before you leave. Miriam has promised to take my gear to St. John's Wood if you'll deposit it at St. Pancras."

The letter dropped from Victoria's hand: she shivered as if a cold wind had struck her. As her eyes travelled vaguely round the room, she caught sight of the coat Mr. Costobadian had taken away in the morning. It hung over a chair. Bright, if inferior, gold stripes were sewn upon the cuffs.



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